

Comment on van Kerkhove's Commentary

Trish King

*Marin Humane Society
Novato, California*

van Kerkhove (2004/*this issue*) appears to put forth a soundly reasoned premise, with several studies backing up her theory. For many years, she states, reinforcing the canine “leader” of a pack has been the accepted—although by no means the only—recommendation.

van Kerkhove discusses reinforcing appropriate behavior through the use of classical and operant conditioning, which in my experience, can work well. However, I cannot dismiss completely or comfortably the use of social dominance theory in behavior modification.

Perhaps it is worth considering that dogs in a human family are, in effect, closer to wolves in captivity than to wolves or feral dogs in the wild. In the studies cited by van Kerkhove, wolves in captivity developed a stronger and less flexible pack structure than did wolves in the wild, in which adolescents tend to split off from the pack and form their own units. Contrast this with a multiple-dog household, in which dogs of whatever age—unless intentionally rehomed by their owners—are restricted from splitting off. This would argue that a solid, reliable structure wherein status was reinforced would be desirable. I agree completely with van Kerkhove that it can be difficult to assess which dog in a multiple-dog household is the “dominant” one or, indeed, if there is a dominant dog—especially given that each animal has his or her own preferred resources.

To function properly, dogs, in my opinion, do need a leader, and the leader should be the human. Following this line of reasoning, the human leaders, much like parents in a human family, should have first access to all the resources they want. In addition,

Requests for reprints should be sent to Trish King, CPDT Clinical member, International Association of Dog Behavior Consultants, Director, Behavior & Training, Marin Humane Society, 171 Bel Marin Keys Boulevard, Novato, CA 94949. Email: www.marinhumanesociety.org

the dogs need to acknowledge the leaders and their right to distribute resources as they see fit. In this way, status is relevant to behavior modification.

Judging by my own experiences, and those of my colleagues, many owners can learn to reinforce appropriate behavior but have trouble with systematic desensitization and counterconditioning, which need consistent repetition over a fairly lengthy period of time to have the desired effect. Many owners do not have the time or dedication to continue such a program. Along with this is the unpredictability of life, which can catch the owners unaware. Uncle Bill might be sitting in the kitchen, absentmindedly munching on some food while, unbeknownst to him, Buffy is lying expectantly under the table. When Jody wanders in and approaches Uncle Bill, the resultant fight, besides causing injury to all concerned, can set back the modification program substantially.

Finally, there can be problems with a conspecific relationship that has deteriorated to the point where one dog actively dislikes the other and will take advantage of any chance to let that be known. This scenario, in my experience, mostly occurs—with disastrous results—when the owner has attempted to let the dogs “work it out.” Often, relationships that have deteriorated to that point cannot be rebuilt.

In summary, I think van Kerkhove has presented a convincing argument in favor of using classical and operant conditionings to modify the behavior of dogs in a household. However, I also think these methods alone cannot be counted on to resolve fully the problems of multiple-dog families.

REFERENCE

- van Kerkhove, W. (2004/this issue). A fresh look at the wolf-pack theory of companion-animal dog social behavior. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 7, 279–285.