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## Should I Follow Status Reduction Programs with my Dog?

The theory behind status reduction programs is that dogs show behaviors in order to increase their relative 'status', or [position in a hierarchy](#), compared to their owners. Since the theory underlying the use of such programs has been shown to be flawed, the majority of trainers and behaviorists no longer recommend such programs.

However, a wide range of different advice and techniques have been used in this type of program, and it is important to understand the types of advice given and the relative degree of risk or benefit associated with each.

### Inhibiting Behavior with Techniques that Cause Fear or Pain

The basis for this type of program is that dogs show behaviors because they are trying to achieve high status, and in order to prevent this, the dog has to be shown 'who is the pack leader'. The problems with this argument, in terms of both evidence of the normal social behavior of dogs, and their cognitive ability is explained in ['What's wrong with using dominance?'](#)

The types of techniques used to achieve this goal can be very aversive to dogs, and can include devices such as prong collars, choke chains, 'alpha rolling' dogs, or other types of physical restraint. The use of these techniques is likely to adversely affect the welfare of dogs, and may result in injury to the dog. For the reasons explained in ['What's wrong with using aversive training techniques?'](#), using these techniques may lead to a worsening of existing problem behaviors, the development of further undesired behaviors, or the risk of injury to the owner.

### Programs Using a Non-confrontational Approach

Other trainers use programs that are based on 'dominance theory' but which do not advocate the use of punitive training techniques. The theory behind these programs is that dogs' perceived 'status' in the hierarchy will be influenced by the extent to which the owner either controls important resources, or controls the activity of the dog. These programs generally involve less direct confrontation, and are less likely to cause the same types of adverse welfare or behavioral outcomes. The types of advice given in these programs include eating before the dog, going through doorways before the dog, restricting access to toys, preventing the dog from getting on the furniture, moving the dog around or controlling interaction with the dog.

Since we now believe that dogs do not 'plan' how to enhance their hierarchy in the [family](#), but develop specific behavioral response to events through [learning](#), many aspects of these programs have limited benefits in resolving specific undesired behaviors. For example, a dog may rush through the back door, because they are excited to get outside, and rushing gets them there faster. Teaching the dog that the door only opens if it waits will make it better behaved in this context, and less likely to knock people over, but the dog will not think about this new rule about doors in terms of an abstract concept like 'dominance status'. Introducing this rule is unlikely, therefore, to alter a behavior which is unrelated to going through doors. Equally, dogs will learn when to expect their food, and are likely to get excited at the events which predict food arriving. Changing the feeding routine may alter behaviors associated with this context, but the dog will not be thinking about how their relative feeding time relates to their 'status'.

In some cases owners are advised to 'get into the dog's bed' or 'take their food away'. These are not advised, since a dog that is anxious about being approached when eating or when in its bed, may show aggression in response to these actions. Again this is not because the dog thinks that it is "Pack leader", but simply that it has learnt from past experience that people or other dogs approaching whilst it is eating predicts that the food will be taken away!



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Some aspects of these programs can, however, be very helpful in some cases, although not due to 'dominance reduction'. Where owners are advised to control their interactions with their dog, for example, this can help reduce anxiety, not by changing relative 'status', but by making interactions with people more consistent. This means that the dog can better predict when interactions will occur and what the likely outcome will be. Many modern programs of behavior therapy include protocols which aim to increase the consistency of interactions between owners and their dogs.

### Consistency

What is important for owners to understand is not to 'dominate' their dog but to be calm and CONSISTENT with it. Dogs, like people, go through their lives trying to work out what predicts important events (good or bad), how to avoid bad things, and how to achieve good things. In each situation, they will develop an expectation of what is likely to happen and what the consequence of their own behavior is likely to be, and will become anxious if these 'expectations' do not match reality. If we are inconsistent or unpredictable in the way we behave with our dogs, we can often cause them considerable anxiety, often without realizing what we have done. The following story is an example of how undesired behaviors can arise through inconsistent responses from owners.

Imagine a cute puppy – let say a Great Dane called 'Bing'. Bing learns that picking up a slipper and rushing round with it makes people laugh and ends in a chase game, something which is very common. Bing therefore learns that picking up something smelling of feet is positively reinforced with lots of lovely owner attention (a strong motivator for dogs that live with people). As Bing gets older, bigger, more dribbly, and less cute, the owners don't find it so funny. He, however, still highly values his owners' attention, so he tries harder, rushing round more, dropping the slipper on their laps, or trying different things that smell of feet. His owners, busy with their lives, get annoyed and start to tell Bing off when he is annoying – perfectly sensible from their point of view, but very confusing for Bing. He still values slippers, and he has a strong learnt association between slippers and attention, but when his owners shout he gets anxious and takes the slipper under the kitchen table.

At some point in this story, Bing picks up the owners best patent leather shoe when they are in a hurry getting ready, and they chase him – this is the old 'game' that he recognizes and starts running off with the shoe. They shout, Bing gets anxious and goes under the table with the shoe. His owner really needs her shoe, so pursues him under the table, hauls him out, smacks him, pries open his mouth and takes the shoe. He is scared – his owner is suddenly displaying unexplained aggression! Bing now has two bits of learning, firstly that picking up things that smell of feet leads to lovely human interaction which he highly values, but also that sometimes when he has a shoe in his mouth his owners might unpredictably show aggression towards him. The cues he recognizes that predict the aggression are them raising their voice pitch, having dilated pupils and putting their hand towards him – if this happens he knows there will be a bad outcome. He has also learnt that appeasement and hiding do not work to avoid the punishment, making it likely that he will start to show aggression.

This is the point that the owner often seeks advice. Unfortunately they may still be advised that Bing is being 'dominant', and instructed to punish him (which will make him more worried about this context and more aggressive). Sometimes they are told that to 'readjust' the hierarchy by going through doors first and eating first. He may learn to do these things, but he will have not learnt anything different about the specific context that he has become anxious about (i.e. people approaching when he has a slipper in his mouth).

To make a difference to this dog's behavior (and welfare), a qualified behaviorist would first explain to the owner to how the behavior has developed, so that they understood the reasons behind the different aspects of the treatment program. The program of advice given would be likely to include a program of behavior therapy which has elements to address the inconsistency of owners, and to teach the dog something different about the specific context(s) that it is responding to. For further information see 'What do I do if my dog has a [behavior problem?](#)'



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### **Conclusion**

In short, dogs don't relate getting on the sofa with their owners, eating first, or going through the door first as any thing to do with an abstract idea of 'social status' – they just learn about those individual contexts. So, there is no fundamental problem with dogs getting on sofas, as long as the owner is consistent about it. If a dog normally comes into the room and leaps straight on the sofa without being asked and gets cuddled, then it develops a strong expectation of doing so and getting rewarded. If owners then one day shouts at the dog, drags it off the sofa by the collar and smacks it because it has muddy paws and they have just vacuumed, the dog is being punished for a behavior that it is normally rewarded for. This dog may respond with aggression - but it's not 'dominant', just confused! It is not helpful, underestimates the amazing learning abilities of our dogs, and often leads to inappropriate responses, to suggest that behaviors are motivated by trying to 'achieve status'.

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