

## Position Statement on Dominance Theory

The IAABC strongly warns against the acceptance and use of dominance theory when working with behavior and training with animals.

Dominance is a concept we frequently encounter in our field. Many people, including some professionals, believe that the most important thing they can do to have a well-behaved animal is to establish themselves as a “pack leader,” or as dominant to whichever species of animal they’re training and living with.

According to dominance theory, behavior problems and lack of training are explained as the animal “trying to be in control.” The way to address these failures of behavior and training and “help” the animal, then, is to “regain the balance of power” in the relationship. Unfortunately, this mindset often leads to the use of punishment, and it can damage the relationship between human and animal.

### **What is dominance?**

Dominance describes a relationship, not a state of being. Current scientific consensus is that no animal is born dominant or submissive. In an antagonistic relationship, like a competition over resources, when one animal is consistently the “loser” and one is the “winner,” the winner is described as dominant. But dominance is also situational and fluid; one individual might be dominant over another in some situations but not in others, or at some times but not others.

Dominance is not a natural order of power between us and our pets, nor is it a healthy or scientifically supported way to approach training and behavior consulting. It certainly doesn’t justify the use of punishment in training. An animal does not have to be dominant or submissive in order to learn—animals learn from what reinforces or punishes their behavior. They can learn from other animals in their group, from other species, and by interacting with the environment.

### **What to do instead**

The best way to minimize stress, promote good welfare, successfully prevent, treat, and manage behavior problems, train effectively, and help develop a strong bond between people and their animals is to focus on positive reinforcement.

Reinforcing behaviors we want to see in place of unwanted ones, and creating an environment set up for success, where good choices are safe and easy for the animal to make, is the best approach to resolving behavior issues. All behavior plans, including those for animals assessed with “dominance aggression,” should focus on an operational understanding of the function of the behavior, and how that function can be served by a different behavior, emotional response or environmental arrangement. The behavior

should always be assessed based on its antecedents and consequence, and not on an anthropomorphic interpretation of intent.

Behavior consultants and trainers should focus on teaching clients how they can avoid reinforcing problem behaviors and showing them how to be a consistent, caring teachers. To work effectively and ethically, an animal trainer or behavior consultant must have a proper understanding of the natural world, each species' natural behaviors, and what is significant to the individual animal in our care. Misunderstood dominance theory and the punitive, harmful approaches it is used to justify has no place in modern, evidence-based training and behavior work.

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