

## Secrets To Becoming The “Alpha Dog” & Being Your Poodle's Pack Leader

Technically speaking, dogs as a separate species are supposed to be evolved from the wolves. Research indicates that the wolf mutated into several breeds, according to the climate, geography and the environment. As these separate breeds were assimilated and socially integrated into the human society, they became distinct as the domesticated dog. So you see, what we have as the pure bred dogs today, might not share the blood of the wolves any more but they do retain some instincts. One of these is the pack mentality.

### Part of a Pack

Living in a pack made it easier for a breed to care for each other and provided the comforts of home, hearth and companionship. But not all were equal in a pack. There had to be a leader, who could unite them and dictate the terms for the rest. This was the Alpha. The pack was so structured that the Alpha had the first and last say. He led the pack. He ate first. He decided the movement of the pack. The rest had to accept his dominance and follow.

Submission to the Alpha dog was absolute, because he was stronger, more powerful, and wiser and it wasn't easy to defeat him. Any one who tried to challenge the leadership was hunted down. If the Alpha of the pack was powerful, there was no room for dissent and the motto was “Follow the leader”.

Consequently, the pack unity was attributed to the Alpha. Rules were set by the Alpha and the others picked up his lead. Somehow this one leader helped reign in the inherent wildness in the individual members and convert them into a coherent group. Think about it- a whole bunch of untamed species, united under a powerful leader to maintain the discipline and harmony of the pack. Till today the pack mentality of some breeds of dogs requires that they be led.

### What's the big deal about being Alpha?

The big deal about being Alpha of the pack is that it's the alpha dog that gets the respect. He's the top dog who is at the top of the social structure. He not only command the respect, he is also obeyed. His word is the rule that must be adhered to. The moment he lays stake to the leadership of the pack, all the rest have to fall into line. Obedience is forthcoming and discipline becomes a way of life. Simply put, if you are the Alpha dog, you're the one in charge.

Usually the alpha dog is male which is why if your Poodle is a female, she is more likely to accept your position of control. An alpha dog is always much more confident, fearless and in control. The alpha dog is also more affectionate which makes him a good pet. This dog knows his way around and can bully anyone into a corner or make anyone succumb

to his charms. There is no need to be big to be the alpha. You just need that mental makeup to lead and dominate others.

Dogs, ever since they have been domesticated, are the only unique species that has accepted the dominance of human beings. The tag, "Man's best friend", comes from the fact that they have learned to live with human beings, not because they are stupid enough to take orders, but because they are intelligent enough to discern the owner who can command their respect, just like the alpha in their pack. Take a look around and you will see that there will be one person in the family, whom the dog will respect above all the others- that person is the alpha who they have decided to follow.

So when it comes to living with a dog, it is a big deal being the alpha!

### **Do all dogs need an Alpha?**

Doesn't matter what breed your dog is, he or she is looking for a leader. It's not just a Poodle or an Alaskan Malamute who need to be controlled by an alpha. Even a tiny Chihuahua wants to know whom she has to listen to. Dogs need their masters to be guiding them, caring for them, channeling their energy and protecting them.

Many owners have varied reasons for abandoning their Poodles. Sometimes the complaint is that the dog is too hyper. Others say their dogs were not trainable material and low in obedience. You must understand that a dog is an intelligent species that is not a pup that will jump to all your commands. You have to win his or her respect, confidence and loyalty to command his or her obedience. For every hyper and untrainable dog, there is an owner who could not be the effective alpha of the pack.

Without a lead to follow, they cannot be house trained or obedient. Without a leader, they are directionless and very undisciplined. In fact if they find no one to look up to, they end up with anti-social behavior. Dogs that are bred to stay with humans need to have a master and owner who can be top dog to their follower act.

### **What is being the Alpha?**

Becoming the top dog or the Alpha is a process to which every family member has to contribute. It's an image you have to strive to for the benefit of having your Poodle listen and look up to you. It's about being more intelligent, dignified, knowledgeable, confident and commanding respect. Which is why none of the other members in the family should dilute your rules.

For example, suppose your Poodle puppy jumps on you or nips at your hands during play, and you deal with it firmly by ignoring the jumping till the dog stops and saying "no" to the biting and discouraging it totally. However if another person in the family decides to allow the jumping and plays at the nipping game, the dog will immediately register that person in his mind as someone lower down in the pack that can be jumped at. The jumping and nipping will continue as a behavior.

The Alpha of the pack has to be above all the others and his or her authority is final. This does not mean that the alpha cannot or must not show any affection or love to the Poodle. It just means setting the rules, adhering to them and being the first in the hierarchical order of things. If the Alpha wants the Poodle to come, the dog must come to the alpha. If the alpha needs to take the dog out for a walk, the alpha must lead while the dog follows.

Being Alpha of your dog doesn't mean physical dominance. Think of it more like a mental leash that would lead your Poodle in the right path of house training, obedience, right behavior and ultimately a content life with you.

### 24 Steps to take to become 'The Alpha'

The steps that are part of the ladder to the top of the pack are several. Mind you they are all more attitude oriented than action. Please note that physical punishment will not enforce you as the Alpha- it will only create distrust, fear and a grudging sense of submission. You want to be the alpha for the good of your Poodle, i.e. to give him or her a lead to follow and make his or her adjustment with the human pack smoother. Here are few of the things you will need to do climb to the top dog spot:

- **Walk the walk:** Walk like the leader. Look powerful and authoritative. When you deal with your Poodle, use a firm voice. Do not go down on your knees and beg the dog to sit or stay- just tell him what to do. You should not be the one putting a request to your Poodle. You are the alpha, so use the command words as commands that have to be listened to. Remember that dogs are intelligent enough to know who is leadership material. If you waver in your behavior, he can sense your doubt. Act like the alpha of the back and show him who is boss.
- **Look him/her in the eye:** When you give a command, look straight at your Poodle. Make sure he can see that you mean business and that it is not a command to be disobeyed. Always hold eye contact with your Poodle, no matter how big or small he or she is. Call out to the dog and make sure that he or she also looks straight at you. If he looks at you in an attempt to defy you, then stare back at him firmly without blinking, till he lowers his gaze. It's not only a way of establishing a contact, it's also a way for your dog to figure out the hierarchy in the pack.
- **Muzzle power:** This doesn't mean put a physical muzzle and strap him up. This means that when you handle him or her, cover the muzzle of your Poodle's face and hold on for a few seconds. This gesture is a dominant gesture and can be part of when you are patting or rewarding your Poodle. Do it gently, not as a show of giving out a punishment but as a show of having control.
- **Do the royal ignore act:** You do not like the way your puppy is jumping? Then ignore him. Do not say a word when he is doing something to annoy you. Ignore it like you just can't see him. Till he stops, do not even acknowledge his presence. Do not give him commands that he will disobey anyway, i.e. if he is jumping up

and down and you tell him to stop, he won't. So instead of using commands and risk being disobeyed, what you need to do is ignore the action and act blind till he stops.

- **Stick to routine:** Follow a schedule and be methodical in your routine. A leader should not be functioning in a haphazard way. The alpha gets to decide the routine and stick to it. Have fixed times for meals, potty, walks, training sessions, play and nap time. This will not only get them house broken, it will make them obedient to the routine of things and accept that to please you, they have better stick to the schedule. Having a routine also gives the dog a feeling of security and he or she will be grateful to you as the alpha, for providing them the protection and care that they need.
- **Your space is sacred:** Your bed is your bed and is not meant for your Poodle. If you do not want him lolling on your bed as an adult, then get him off as a puppy. Make it clear with a firm "off" that your space is off limits to him. If you allow him to use your private spaces, you will be diluting your authority as the alpha of the pack. The moment you allow your Poodle to sleep on your bed, he will see you as an equal. You will be more a littermate than an alpha.
- **Establish your status, then train:** It is no point trying to get your Poodle to listen to you if he hasn't accepted you as the alpha. The moment you bring him home, first make the effort to get him to obey the simple commands "sit" and "no". Get him to accept your leadership role and then begin the regular training on the leash. During the first few days, fix a routine for everything and even though you might carry your puppy's crate to your bedroom, do not allow him on your bed. Love him but teach him to adore you. Once he looks up to you and follows you around the house- you can be assured that you are on the way to becoming his alpha and that the training sessions can now begin. Never train without a leash as it helps you to retain control. Once he or she are off the leash and running free, they have the upper hand.
- **Do not allow growling:** No one growls at the Alpha. In fact no one growls at the alpha's children either. Do not get intimidated by growling. He or she is challenging your authority and you have to quell the dissent right away. Use a firm "No" and show the displeasure in your face. Let him understand that growling at the alpha and family members is not allowed. If your puppy is in your lap and growling at others, put him down and reprimand him. Do not allow growling and do not let your children or other family members be threatened by it.
- **Alpha first:** Even if your Poodle is a lady, it's alpha first through the door! Always make it a point to lead your Poodle while entering or leaving through doors. If your Poodle is trying to rush in through the door, hold him or her back. Do not say a word and request them to wait. Just hold them back and enter first. Then lead them through. You must be the one they follow and not the other way

around. If your dog is blocking your way, move him. Do not do the submissive act of moving around him. You're alpha, you have right of way- so he's the one who has to move.

- **Love, don't cosset:** Nobody is saying don't love your Poodle. You must love your dog but do not cosset it to the point where he is pampered beyond listening to your commands. Love him but be firm. Also do not love him so much that he cannot protect himself. Be balanced- being alpha to your dog is kind of like being a responsible parent to your child. To be the alpha, you need to show what it called in parenting parlance as tough love! Love your Poodle but do not baby him to the point where he is scared of a mouse!
- **Poodle Petting topic:** This point is related to love and how to show it. No one says patting and hugging your dog is wrong, but if you want to be alpha, be advised before you spoil them too much. Usually the fussing is done over the alpha dog while the dogs lower down in the pack have to be doing the entire show of licking and groveling. Physical cuddling is a show of subordination. So if you are constantly picking up your puppy and cuddling it all the time, and leaving the training of simple commands till later, you could be on the way to losing the alpha spot. Cuddle your dog or puppy, but first teach him or her to sit down. Once they learn the sit command, call them to you, make them sit and then do the cuddling. Use the "no" and the "sit" commands from the beginning. If he comes up to you with a wagging tail, wanting some attention, don't rush to cosset him. Sit him down and then pat him. Also don't go down on your knees to greet him, as it's a submissive act not befitting an alpha.
- **Learn to handle your Poodle:** Touch your Poodle, as in roll him over, rub his belly, feel his face, stick your finger in to feel his gum. All these actions will not only help you when you groom him, these are also acts of submission on the part of your dog. If he lets you handle his body without growling, it means he has accepted you as the alpha. Grooming your dog is a great way of establishing a bond with him or her and a way of showing you care and also a way of showing you are in control. Handle your older poodle patiently, as he or she might object while a puppy would be more accepting. Increase the handling of the dog gradually and soon you will see that he or she is more comfortable with your touch, because they trust you as the alpha.
- **Get him to show respect:** It could be quite a problem if your dog decides to run down other family members. If he can't wrest the alpha spot from you, he will try and dominate the others. Teach all your family members how to command him to sit and how to get him to obey their "Nos". Advise your family members to take over the feeding routine to establish their dominance over him or take him for walks and get him to follow them. Teach them how to command the obedience of the Poodle rather than be dominated by him the rest of their lives. The way dogs try to dominate is through growling, not listening and generally asserting themselves over someone else other than the alpha.

- **Ban the rough play:** You are the alpha of the pack so do not allow any rough playing. This is because it is instinct for dog to feel ascendancy over you if they can dominate you physically, which they will try hard to do. If they can pin you down, you can consider that you have lost your alpha spot to a better and stronger alpha! So don't rough house with your Poodle. Also discourage your children and others from playing rough and make them understand that dogs play these games to establish and claim supremacy of the pack.
- **Fight the contender:** Sometimes you can end up with an alpha dog for a Poodle. He is not used to being second fiddle so he will be instinctively on his guard. Challenge the contender and do not let him have the upper hand. They will always like to take your space, roll on your bed, and not listen to you when you call. Maintain your dignity and ignore the challenge he throws. Do not let him lead you. Enforce things like feeding him when it is time for him to eat and not because he demands it. When you walk him do not let him lead or enter the door first. Fight and claim the top dog spot. Do note however that alpha dogs make great Poodles because they are smarter to train- once they accept you as the human alpha.
- **Beware the take over:** Some dogs take over before you know it in their endearing and gentle ways. They will worm their way into your lap and worm you out of the chair! They subtly assume the human alpha's position before you know it! Be alert and don't let them have their way or you will lose control.
- **"Down boy!" works:** Train your dog to stay down. This is a good way to get your dog in to a submissive posture. In fact it's a good way to have a peaceful time during dinner or when you are busy reading. Get your dog to obey the command "down" and make him stay down for 15 minutes, if not longer. This will make him understand that when the alpha (you) are busy, he needs to be quiet.
- **Size doesn't matter:** You are the alpha and hence at the top of the rung. Remember though that you are the alpha not because of your size but because of your attitude. If you start treating your small Poodle as an equal you will lose your status. The moment you begin giving in by letting your little Poodle share your space because he or she is so little, you will find that they have no respect for you and have edged you out of the hot seat. Don't lend your little Poodle your couch or any space that belongs to you- those are the privileges of the alpha. If you baby your little guy or girl, they will assume that they are the dominant alpha and will not pay attention to your commands.
- **Make him sing for his supper:** Do not allow your Poodle to dictate or demand his meals. As alpha, you get to eat first and he must wait. Get him to sit patiently as you serve his food. If he rushes to eat, cover the food bowl with your hand, until he moves away. If he doesn't listen to you and sit away as you serve him,



take the food bowl and walk away. Get the bowl of food later and repeat the action. This time make sure he sits before you allow him to eat. When you command him to come to the bowl, make sure you are standing and not kneeling down. While giving commands, always have a dominating stance and a firm voice.

- **Treats have to be earned:** Do not give your Poodles treats unless they have done something to receive it. Make sure that you do not treat them just because they look so sweet! You are the alpha, who gives a treats when your bidding has been done and you are happy with your pack member. If a Poodle misbehaves, then he or she gets no goodies. Do not reward or Poodle your dog when he misbehaves. They must earn their treats with obedience
- **Lead the leash:** On no account should you as the alpha be on the other end of the leash, while your dog leads the way. When you walk your dog, make sure that he walks as close as possible to you and definitely not ahead of you. Train him by refusing to go in the direction in which he is pulling. When he pulls in a certain direction, walk the other way and then give the leash a tug, to make him come to you. Confuse him by not going his way, till he begins to look at you for guidance. Once you have his attention, walk in a way with him by your side. If he again tries to yank you in another way, stop right away and go the opposite way.
- **Channel his energy:** One of the ways you can be the alpha to your dog is by giving him a job to do. Roll him a ball and get him to get it back to you. Play fetch or Frisbee. Hide things and let him find and bring it to you. You can even hide yourself and get him to find you. Do remember that you should always have control of the ball or the stick at the end of the game. Don't let him undermine your authority by running away with the items, which he should actually bring to you. If you are playing tug, make sure that you win even if it means yanking him off his feet You can even find him chores to do in the house like fetching your sneakers and socks or even the newspaper from the front porch. By assigning him a job, you are dispensing your authority and making him do your bidding.
- **Set the wrong right:** Do not encourage the wrong behavior. This would mean that you should not laugh at his or her errors. They might look funny when they are trying to pull out the clothes from the washing machine in a bid to help you, but do not laugh, or they will see it as an antic to be repeated and you will end up with torn linen. Enforce the right action right away. Don't think you can correct a puppy later, when he's grown up.
- **Be a fair leader:** A leader not only leads, he or she is also fair and just. Have reasonable expectations. If your dog misbehaves, punish him. If he rectifies his behavior, reward him. Show him affection when he deserves it. Make the right decisions and don't go overboard with the dominance. The idea behind being alpha is to be in-charge and in-control, not to be hard-hearted.

These are all the steps you can follow to establish yourself as the alpha of the pack. The idea is to consistently adopt the alpha behavior till the message gets to your Poodle dog. If you change your attitude and assume an air of authority, your dog, no matter how spoiled he or she is, will automatically sense your power and begin to evaluate you as the leader. It's all about attitude. Have you ever wondered how some people manage to get their dogs to listen to every word they say? It's the alpha attitude.

### What's not part of being the Alpha?

Here are some things that are not included as alpha behavior:

- **Indecisiveness and irregularity**- Do not waver about routine and disciplining your Poodle, because he or she will sense the weak link and manipulate you. Consistency is the key to being an alpha.
- **Treating the Poodle as an equal**- This means that you have diluted your control as the leader and opened up avenues for your dog to challenge you.
- **Physical punishment**- This will just make your dog more stubborn and uncooperative and will not inspire the dog to follow your lead.
- **Losing control**- If you end up screaming out of frustration, your Poodle will know that you have lost control of yourself. Alphas are always in control.
- **Isolating a Poodle for misbehavior**- This can be pretty cruel for dogs who like to be with the family and could lead them on to even more unacceptable behavior like barking, howling and tearing up things.
- **Unnecessary harshness**- You need to be firm not harsh and certainly not harsh when there is no reason to be. Be firm with a dog when he has done something wrong, not because you are in a bad mood. Just as there is a reason to reward, there is a reason to discipline.

As you can see, the alpha role is about an attitude that gets dogs to sit up and obey because they respect the person as an authority figure. Think from the dog's point of view: It's not about physical power that gets him to listen. That's immaterial. It's also not about a week's effort. It's a role that is repeated enough to make it clear to him that the alpha is here to stay. It's the fact that here's a person who leads the way but at the same time takes care of him, grooms him, walks him and loves him. Being Alpha means you are in charge but it also means that you love your dog enough to be in charge of his well-being too.

### Debating the Alpha Roll

There are many physical ways of establishing your alpha position that are debated about by breeders, trainers and vets. Some are for it some against it. One of these aspects is the alpha roll. It is a physical action aimed at getting your dog to see who is alpha in the pack.

Basically the alpha rollover involves that you:

- Turn your dog onto his back, just as you would to groom him, only this is done in a determined intimidating manner.



- Once you have him on his back, you hold him down for a while. Hold the dog down till you can feel his tense body relaxing which means he is submitting to your power.
- Some dogs might give a tough fight and you might get scratched but you must hold down till the dog submits.
- All through this process of pinning him down, you are not to say a word.
- Do not press down too hard. Just spread out your fingers with two fingers near the neck and use enough pressure with your hands to keep them in the alpha position. The idea is not to hurt them.
- Soon the dog will stop resisting and turn his head to a side. It's like offering you his neck in submission.
- Let go of him before you overdo the pressure.

The whole idea behind the alpha roll is physical ascendancy. It was the way of the pack to determine who is alpha by a display of strength. It is said that in a pack of wolves, when the alpha was challenged, he would attack the contender and go straight for the neck as many predators do. To get out of harms way, the contender to the post would roll over on his back and offer his neck as a kind of submission act.

The thing is dogs have evolved beyond wolves. Even if they retain pack traits, they are not wolves and since they are domesticated what they look for are human alphas. So how far a physical act like the alpha roll will be in establishing an owner as an alpha is pretty debatable. Contrary to the theory, the dog may feel he is being hurt deliberately and would submit to you to avoid any further attack. All it might achieve is a temporary display of brawn. Physical dominance isn't a great basis for a relationship with your Poodle.

### **A responsible alpha**

Be an alpha with a head and heart in the right places. Your Poodle is smart; you just have to prove you are smarter. You can do this by understanding the difference between being dominant and being a leader. You can do this by knowing your Poodle well, as in knowing their quirks, what he or she likes, what they don't, what they fear and what makes them happy. It's about consistently enforcing the appropriate behavior patterns and never being hard on them without reason. It's like raising a child and being a gentle dictator.

The key to being a responsible alpha is to establish a sound lead for him or her to follow, start early, be consistent and love your Poodle as much as you can. Alpha is not about who has the power- it's about who can lead the best and you have it in you to be a great alpha. It shows, otherwise you wouldn't have brought home a Poodle to love, nurture and care about in the first place!

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