

Dogs & Wolves

3 Packs & Families

Social aspects of the human relationship with dogs – and occasionally, wolves. For dog trainers and the interested dog-owner.



By Phil Watson

PG Cert WBL (Canine Behaviour & Dog Training) Middlesex University

Packs And Families

1	Living with dogs	6
1.1	The descendants of wolves	6
1.2	How do wolves live ?.....	6
1.3	What is a wolf pack ?.....	7
1.4	A pack needs a mix of skills to survive	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.5	The two most fundamental roles.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.6	How does a wolf pack start ?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.7	How stable is a wolf pack ?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.8	How is all this relevant to the dog-owner relationship ?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.9	Dominance – fict and faction.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.9.1	Does dominance exist in dogs ?.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10	What is a hierarchy ?.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.1	Flexible social structure	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.2	The structure of a wolf pack	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.3	Dominant – the word itself	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.4	Dominant or not ?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.5	The emergence of dominance	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.6	Opinions about dominance	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.6.1	The best opinion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.6.2	The worst opinions.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.6.3	The competing-for-mating-rights myth	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.7	Labelling dogs as dominant	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.8	Territorial stimulation	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.10.9	Reactivity	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.11	Possessiveness.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.12	Respect.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.13	Hard and soft dogs	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14	The rules.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.1	Possession of assets & control of resources:.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.2	Toys:	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.3	Food:	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.4	Rough games:.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.5	Important places:.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.6	The owner’s attention:	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.7	Arriving home:.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.8	Visitors:.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.9	Exercise.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.10	Confidence and demeanour.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.11	Leading the way	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.12	Peace and quiet	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.14.13	Variations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.15	Dogs and the family	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.15.1	Things that go wrong	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.16	Character qualities	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.17	Dominance summary	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.18	What about leadership ?.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2	Appendix A.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1	Table A.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Packs And Families

2.2 Table B.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
2.3 Table C.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Packs And Families

There is much talk of the relationship between the social behaviour of dogs and wolves and how the similarities may or may not affect our relationship with dogs. The majority of this theorising originates from people who have never actually raised, kept and built a relationship with both wolves and dogs as the author has. To a person who has done so, much of this theorising is blatantly inaccurate and over-simplified and occasionally even smacks of simple controversy-mongering. To the person who has worked regularly hands-on with both wolves and dogs, it is always easy to spot the output from people who haven't; it is obvious that they don't own wolves and they don't work with them. What they say might convince another such person but it does not convince someone who has worked with both.

Packs And Families

One of the difficult things about writing a document like this is in deciding what to leave out. Opinions on this will vary from trainer to trainer and owner to owner but there has to be a limit somewhere and that means that something – or rather, a whole lot of things – will have to take a back seat. This document was designed with two purposes in mind. Firstly to provide information that is most often - for whatever reasons - missing or unreliable in published material; If you read something here that contradicts what you have read in a book or website then on average you should believe what it says here. Secondly, this document acts as a focus to draw together, in one place, the key facts and truths upon which understanding of the subject depends.

This essay is mostly aimed at people wanting to be dog trainers and the interested owner and is written from the standpoint that what matters is the truth about the subject, not political correctness, trendy theory, cult dogma or sensationalism. You will find no platitudes here, just fact and truth as near as I can record the two. It is designed to be read in its correct place in the sequence of other essays in this series. If you have not read the preceding essay(s) in this series yet, then you may not appreciate the meaning and rationale behind various terms which are discussed in the other essays.

In this essay, I have tried to account as best I can for the differences between individual dogs. One can almost never say things like “no dog ever ...” or “every dog will always..” because dogs are all different. Even if instead one says things like “most dogs..” one will inevitably run into the person who has never met “a dog that does..”. If you have never met a dog that does anything mentioned here then all I can suggest is that you enlighten us and write your own essay on dogs.

When you make up your mind who to believe about a subject, how do you decide ? Do you want to believe what your friends do, what your parents approve of, what makes you feel happy or just the bald, uncomfortable truth for its own sake ? In dog training, looking at the published material, you certainly have the choice. In writing this essay, I have simply taken the role of informed but dispassionate observer and analytical recorder. I have no ideological axes to grind, no complexes to indulge and I am not in anyone’s theory and dogma camp. When I promote an idea, it is because that idea works in the real world; when I debunk one, it is because no matter how much water it holds in the world of theory and popular books, it doesn’t hold any in the real, hands-on world. What you read here is bald - perhaps uncomfortable - truth for its own sake

1 Living with dogs

1.1 *The descendants of wolves*

- Although most dogs are much more socially tolerant and non-reactive than wolves, many do display a stronger, more wolf-like social intensity which is clearly a legacy - and expression of - their original wolf ancestry.
- Over-intense, ancestral social and territorial behaviour is a common cause of dog-owner relationship problems.

Life with a human family lays a dog open to stimulation of intense, ancestral behaviours and we have to be aware of and balance out which ones it's better not to stimulate at all, which ones we can't help stimulating and how to use or manage the ones we stimulate either deliberately or by default.

The easiest way to understand this set of behaviours and inclinations is to look at the original, raw template of it in the wolf and then consider in what ways it is similar or different in dogs.

Just before we get to discussing this, it has to be said that although the behavioural similarities between dogs and wolves are strong and un-missable, there is nevertheless a reality-check point beyond which comparisons can become stretched and less than helpful. Although dogs and wolves have much in common, they are obviously not actually the same animal. Think of it this way: If you were discussing engineering, you could explain a lot of things in broad principle by drawing analogies between a car and a bus but when you start getting down into the finer detail of how each actually works, the comparisons need to become a lot more specific and conditional. Generalisations at the detailed level do need more justification.

1.2 *How do wolves live ?*

Like their ancestor, the wolf, dogs are social animals that naturally tend to live in groups. For wolves, the instinctive urge to form a pack is very strong indeed and packs tend to be tightly bonded and strongly hostile in their reaction to would-be new joiners. For dogs, the pack urge varies in intensity and a social group can consist of anything from a small, tight-knit pack comprising just a few relatives and having much of the social dynamic of a wolf pack to a much looser and more casual circle of acquaintances that may spend only a little time together. Because of this behavioural adaptation and flexibility, life alongside a human family is something that comes naturally to most dogs. Most dogs can handle being left on their own for hours on end as easily as they can handle living among a big family in a small, cramped home. Few, if any, wolves could cope with this range of living conditions.

Obviously, group-living and especially, group-hunting as practised by wolves and wild dogs, offers several survival advantages and evolution has had to make some compromises in the ruthless and selfish operation of the "survival of the fittest" principle in order to permit group-living.

Packs And Families

Animals that live alone are driven instinctively to commandeer and defend – with as much violence as necessary – every resource they can obtain for their own exclusive use. Other than in a mating or parenting context, the only response a non-group-living animal has to the approach of another whilst it is in possession of something valuable – such as food – is to threaten, attack or run away. Escalation of the defensive and threatening behaviour is without limit and moderated only by considerations of whether the animal thinks it can win or will have to back down and run away.

For group-living animals such as wolves, the intensity and escalation of the defensive, threatening and attack behaviours they direct toward other animals of their own pack has been modified by evolution such that actual attack and bloodshed become much rarer. Evolution has equipped wolves with what amount to behavioural “brakes” that reduce the speed and degree of escalation from defensive threat into attack and it has also lubricated and augmented the behavioural mechanisms for backing down, giving up and submitting. In short, it has struck a balance between the advantages of purely selfish possession and those of group-living - and it has had to do so; no social group can survive un-moderated competition and aggression.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that evolution has only tempered the competitive aspects of selfish possession in wolves and dogs, it has not completely removed them. Each individual animal in a family or pack must do its best to satisfy its needs and look after its own interests whilst simultaneously acting in a way that puts least stress on the social fabric of its group; and this is obviously as true with human beings as it is with dogs or wolves.

The fact that humans, dogs and wolves both tend to like living in social groups should tell us quite a bit about how such a way of life is behaviourally possible. After all, plenty is known about group dynamics in humans (and primates) and the fundamental principles are effectively identical because the objectives and benefits are pretty near identical for both species. (In fact, the problems are much the same too). We just bring a bit more behavioural adaptability and unpredictability into the recipe than wolves do.

1.3 What is a wolf pack ?

This is quite difficult to answer; Although a wolf pack is, simply and manifestly, just a number of wolves living together, there is quite a lot of variability in how you would see them all behaving if you observed different packs for a while.

A pack can be anything from two wolves upwards. The environment the pack is living in will tend to limit the maximum size. For example, in the wilds of Northern Canada and Alaska etc., a pack might consist of typically four to about eight animals. Packs of twenty or more occasionally exist for a short time but they tend to be highly unstable and soon split up.

In more populated areas – such as Eastern Europe, packs tend to be smaller because of human pressure in terms of deliberate hunting / killing and individuals tend to live shorter lives for those same reasons - typically around three to four years maximum. Most packs in Eastern Europe have about four wolves in them at most.

Just like human and primate groups, a wolf pack can be sexually closed or open. Although it is most commonly only the breeding pair of a pack that will mate and have cubs, other members of the pack can occasionally have promiscuous relationships with each other and/or one of the

Packs And Families