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## **ACCEPTANCE OF AUTHORITY**

Any dog in its relationship with other dogs and with people fits onto a scale of what is most often called "dominance behavior." At the upper end is the dog that does what he wants when he wants and enforces his will if he is thwarted--the alpha, the most dominant dog. At the lower end is the dog that seems to have no ego strength at all--the omega or most submissive one.

Perhaps this component of behavior is better viewed as acceptance of authority. Many people want strong, brave Akitas and are afraid that a submissive dog will be everyone's doormat. In fact, the relationships formed between dogs themselves and between dogs and humans are very complex and very fluid, subject to change depending on circumstances. Also important to understanding the significance of such measures is the character of the breed itself. A dominant Rottweiler is a very different dog from a dominant Papillion. A submissive Akita is not the same thing as a submissive Chihuahua.

### **The Pack Incorporated**

The roots of dominance behavior are found in the dynamics of the pack, the social unit into which canines organize themselves. Observations of naturalists have given us great insight into how the pack functions. These have been done in the wild on wolves and coyotes and in academic settings, on dogs.

They show us an organization that in many ways is analogous to one of our corporations. At the top is the pack leader, the CEO. He is responsible for the welfare of the group and charged with its protection. His perks are commensurate with his responsibility. He gets first pick of the food and gets as much as he wants. Everyone looks up to him and curries his favor. Unless a corporate takeover is in the works, no one challenges his authority in the slightest way.

At the bottom of the corporate ladder is the fellow who has virtually no status, either personally or as a result of his position. He's the step-n-fetchit for anyone who gives him an order. While the CEO may have a genuine liking for this guy and may

even share the table with him once in a while, you can bet the rest of the group will have very little social interaction with such a low-status individual.

In fact, among the lower-status members is an element of contentment. They know their place and keep it. Friction occurs most frequently in the middle and upper management individuals. Always trying to move up the ladder means exchanging places with someone else, so they may well scrap and squabble. Too serious a fight might draw the attention of the CEO, however, so fights are more to intimidate than to damage. If the head honcho does intervene, his discipline is quick, sure, and accepted by the offending parties.

### **The Pack At Home**

When dogs move in with humans, they interact with other animals and with humans in much the same way as with a group of other dogs. Their sense of where they belong in a hierarchy is finely tuned. They have no trouble assessing their proper position in the group and quickly move to occupy it.

Problems arise when the position of the dog is at odds with the other members of the group. For instance, suppose the dog lives with a couple. The husband is very strong but the wife is a shy, non-assertive person. When the wife is home alone, the dog is very protective of her. He remains positioned between her and any visitors and maintains a watchful posture. One day, a coworker, who is a more dominant person, comes over. He is leery of the dog, and the wife decides to put the dog in another room. When she takes his collar and starts leading him out, the dog growls at her. She lets go, makes apologies to the friend, and they both leave the house.

Several weeks later, a similar circumstance arises. The wife is thoroughly aggravated with the dog and decides to make her point. She takes his collar and begins leading him out of the room. When he growls at her, she yells at him. He jumps up and bites her in the face.

An alternative scenario, given the same relationships, is that the wife opens the door and admits the friend. The dog stands between them and displays some hostile body language that makes the friend wary. He asks her to leave if she can't put the dog up. She moves around the dog, standing next to the visitor. As they are walking out the door, the dog attacks the stranger.

Is this a vicious dog, turning on its owner or engaging in an unprovoked attack? While it may appear so, in the first case, the dog is carrying out what it perceives as its responsibilities as an assistant pack leader. When the husband is gone, that mantle falls upon the dog, and nothing the people have done makes the dog think otherwise. He does not approve of the wife's decision to take him out of the room, since he will then be unable to protect her from what he considers a threat, so he tells her he does not approve of her actions by growling. Her acceptance of his authority confirms his judgment. When she leaves with the stranger, however, his authority is defied and he is worried about her safety.

The next time she tries to take him out, several factors come into play. He knows she can circumvent him because she did it last time and he is worried about her. She is his responsibility. He growls at her, but she does not let go. This is a challenge to his authority. His subsequent bite is discipline delivered by a higher status individual to a lower-status one who is transgressing. These bites are almost always delivered to the face because that is how a disciplinary bite is delivered between dogs.

With another couple, the husband is a mild personality and the wife is more assertive, Both are showing the dog; however, when the husband shows him, the dog often growls at the judge. He never does this with the wife.

Again, the dog is acting as a protector of a lower-status member of his pack. His inclination to do so is reinforced by the husband's body language. He leans down next to the dog and frequently puts his head level with the dog's in a gesture of what he thinks is affection, but what the dog perceives as submission. Because he knows the dog is likely to growl the man has become very anxious in the ring. The poor dog senses this anxiety and incorrectly interprets the approach of the stranger as the cause, thus reinforcing his decision to warn this person away.

Curing these problems can be relatively simple. In the latter case, the husband developed a more assertive posture with the dog after reading a book about dominance behavior. He quit bending over, never kissed the dog again, and corrected him firmly when the dog growled. In short, he moved up the social ladder to a position above the dog, so the dog was no longer obliged to protect him.

In the former case, the dog and the wife went through several obedience classes where she firmly established control over the dog. They developed a routine for meeting and dealing with visitors and strangers. Instead of regarding the dog as her husband's major inconvenience, she has developed a deep rapport with him. They love and respect each other.

In a more serious case involved some particularly peculiar behavior of the family pet around one of the middle children, a nine-year old boy. While the child sat on the floor watching tv, the dog brought his chew-toy over and dropped it near the child. Then, he circled the child and watched sharply. When the child reached for the toy, the dog growled and snatched it up. Correctly alarmed, the mother returned the dog to the breeder.

Clearly, like the middle management of the corporation, the dog considered itself only slightly above this particular child in the family hierarchy and perceived the child as a threat to his position in the group. His opinions were probably confirmed by some of the actions of the child, such as sitting on the floor. His actions with the toy were a way for him to enforce his higher status. Had the dog not been removed, the situation would surely have escalated and the child might have been severely bitten.

## **Evaluative Tools**

Fortunately, a fairly reliable method of testing young dogs to determine how willingly they accept authority has come out of all the research on dog behavior. Originally developed for guide dog organizations to aid in selection of promising youngsters, these tests are valid for other applications as well. Information about the PAT or PET (Puppy Aptitude Test, Puppy Evaluation Tests) is available from many sources. Gail Fisher and Wendy Volhard published a long article in the March, 1979, and in the 1985 AKC Gazettes on administering and interpreting the test. Mrs. Volhard also sells a pamphlet and score sheet which you can obtain by writing her at: RD 1, Box 518, Phoenix, NY 13135, (315) 593-6115. It is also available on the internet at the [Golden Retrievers In Cyberspace](#) WebSite.

PATs are usually done initially at around seven weeks. Puppies are born with an immature brain which should be fully functional at about this time. The first administration should be indicative of the puppy's natural tendencies before his environment has had much impact. Subsequent tests will show changes because of outside influences. Tests are given in an area new to the puppy and by a stranger.

The first section of the test deals with social attraction and dominance measures, and you can use these yourself to select a puppy with an appropriate temperament for you even if no testing has been done on the puppies you are looking at.

First, the puppy should be removed from his littermates and observed in a room or area away from them. You want to see how the puppy interacts with people, not with other dogs, and how he interacts with you.

### **Quick Puppy Evaluation**

First, sit on the floor and call him in a friendly voice. If he comes to you, notice whether his tail is up and wagging or tucked. Does he come willingly or slowly and reluctantly? Don't give up if the puppy wanders around exploring first or doesn't immediately respond to you. If he doesn't come to you, go get him and talk gently to him and pet him for a few seconds.

Next, get up and walk around slowly, talking cheerfully to the puppy. Watch what he does. If he follows you, see where he positions himself and how he carries his tail.

These measures of social attraction are followed by two measures of dominance and a third test which indicates the puppy's reaction to them. Sit back down on the floor and gently roll the puppy over on his back. Place your hand across his chest, then restrain him and observe his reaction. After about 20 seconds, let the puppy up. Bend your face down to his, gently stroke his back and talk to him. See what he does.

Last, pick the puppy up by placing your hands on either side of his chest behind his legs. Interlace your fingers together to provide support for his ribs and let him hang in the air. Again, observe his reactions.

## Responses to the Test

Akitas are not usually strongly attracted to strangers, so their behaviors on the social interaction tests have a wide range. Some do not come at all and will not follow the tester. This does not mean they are hopelessly anti-social. Such behavior reflects instead a strongly independent nature.

More typical for the breed in my experience is a puppy that first busies himself exploring the area, looking around and sniffing. This is probably a displacement activity, a face-saving advantage which gives him something to do while he makes up his mind. After a few minutes of this, most will "suddenly" notice your calling them or your walking around and they will come or begin following you

How they come and what they do when they get there tells you something about the puppy. So does how they follow. If the puppy approaches and/or follows with his tail down and the ears held back slightly, you are witnessing a submissive response. The average puppy approaches the tester with his tail up. Confidence in meeting a stranger is indicated by his demeanor and by a wagging tail. The more assertive puppies will paw at your hands or even your face and the most assertive will bite at them also.

When they follow, average puppies walk along beside you. As they move up the scale in assertiveness, they will get between your feet, wandering purposely through them and may even paw at your feet or bite at your shoes. Less social puppies may balk at the come but warm up to the tester by the time he is walking about. Again, tail down and/or ears back are the more submissive indicators.

Most of the Akita puppies I have tested are mildly attracted socially. That is, they go to the tester, either with tail up or down after some exploratory behavior. They may greet the person and immediately wander off. They may follow for a few steps and then drift off to explore. Little holds their interest strongly.

Many of the herding breeds I've tested are put off by the strange surroundings. They seem, however, positively thrilled to see a person, even though they don't know him, and bound over to the tester. In contrast, we've had Akitas who have resolutely refused to participate. None of them grew up to be intransigent monsters, but they were very independent dogs. They were not eager to meet strangers but tolerated them.

Turned on their back, most Akitas lie still, carefully looking away to avoid any hint of eye contact. This is a submissive response and very acceptable. Others lie still for a second, then struggle briefly before calming again. These might glance quickly at your face, but as soon as they see you are looking at them, they deliberately look away. This is a moderate response, indicating a slightly more assertive dog but well within acceptable parameters.

Akita puppies lifted in the air invariably just hang there. Their bodies are usually relaxed, although they might be stiff. More assertive responses on these tests range from flailing and struggling to whining, pawing, and biting. A very assertive puppy may also make eye contact,

**The middle test tells you something about the puppy's acceptance of correction and willingness to forgive. As you might expect, many Akitas are less than enthusiastic about undergoing unpleasant experiences and are not apt to easily forgive the responsible agent. With no real attachment to the tester, many Akita puppies just stalk off. Others remain with the tester but stare off into space. A few of the more forgiving will nuzzle the tester's hands. Assertive responses include pawing or biting at the tester's face and hands.**

### **Selecting a Puppy**

**Choosing the right puppy requires a frank assessment of not only your personality but that of the others in your household, too. Pick a dog that suits the personality of the least dominant person in your family. That too runs on a scale. The least dominant person in my family is well able to handle a mildly dominant Akita. We are all very assertive. My sister-in-law, however, is just able to hold her own with my brother's old Akita, who is a medium-tough dog. Any harder temperament, and she'd be the looser in a contest of wills.**

**A medium puppy might be appropriate for the family with three brash youngsters but not for the one with two girls who hide behind their mother through the whole interview. An unforgiving puppy is not a good choice for the former; he may not be tolerant of rough play that accidentally hurts. The latter is probably better off with the most submissive female.**

**Breeders who avail themselves of the PAT have a very useful tool for placing puppies appropriately. If you are fortunate enough to find one, heed her advice. These tests have no pass or fail, good dog or bad. They are helpful in assessing the native character of a puppy and in suggesting where best to place him and how best to work with him.**

**For instance, all puppies will need some sort of correction and an unforgiving one must learn to accept it in a good spirit. Owners of a less-forgiving puppy should be encouraged to find a training class with positive training methods. Force-training is not only ineffective with this type of dog but may well sour him on training altogether.**

**A very independent puppy makes a poor candidate for a home where no one is at home during the day or where he is left outside most of the time. These dogs are capable of getting along on their own and may not bond well or at all to members of the family. When one of them comes out and finds the dog digging in the flower bed and tries to issue a correction, the result may be aggression on the part of the dog. Even mild Akitas do not take well to corrections from strangers.**

**Of the Akitas I have observed, the vast majority show medium to extreme submissiveness on the PAT. They also show a strong tendency towards independence and some tendency to resent unpleasantness. I personally tested a litter where all the dogs scored in the medium to upper ranges on the entire**

temperament test. While this would be great for a German Shepherd, my experiences since have made me very cautious with such dogs. Two of this litter attacked people, the other was with a very active, very assertive family who loved him dearly but kept him well in hand. He was their beloved pet until his death at ten.

If I had an Akita puppy that tested as very assertive (biting hands, etc.), I would have serious reservations about him. I certainly would repeat the test several times and would be ultra careful about his placement, making sure that the new owners were able to handle such a dog. Certainly, I would be less likely to be concerned with a female that showed dominant tendencies than a male. While some breeds have little difference in temperament between sexes, I don't believe this is true for Akitas. An adult male Akita is just tougher than his female counterpart.

### **The Dominant Dog**

Life with a dominant dog is recounted briefly in the Nov/Dec, 1986, Akita World centerfold by Leslie Bair describing Ch Fukumoto's Ashibaya Kuma, CD, ROM. On his first day at their house as a six-month old puppy, Leslie "awoke to find Kuma's imposing muzzle about two inches from my face and two dark, unfathomable eyes staring at me. We stayed that way for what seemed like an eternity, then he clicked his teeth several times, turned around and trotted out of the room as if dismissing me." She goes on to say that "no one ever really owned him." His place in the family was undisputed, but he wielded his authority with great dignity.

Families can accommodate to such a dog in two ways. The family can respect the dog's decisions or be so much more dominant than he is that the dog recognizes their authority and respects them. In between lies nothing but trouble.

On the other hand, this dog is easier to accommodate than the dog that is jumped up to a dominant position when he is truly not an alpha dog, an example of the Peter Principle in action. The dog has reached its level of incompetence. In these households, the dog have moved into a power vacuum which is created by his interpretation of his human family's behavior.

Really alpha dogs, like the CEO, don't have to keep reminding everyone of their position. It's obvious. Beta and delta dogs pushed into the alpha position often lack the appropriate tools for maintaining their position, so they resort to bullying. If recognized soon enough, these dogs can be demoted back to a place in the pack where they are more comfortable with their role. Left too late, they can be so entrenched in their position, they can't give it up easily.

## Other Signs

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If a PAT is not available, you should try to do your own testing on the puppy to determine how dominant he is. Other clues to his temperament can help you make your assessment. The puppy that runs out first to greet visitors is the most dominant puppy, not necessarily the friendliest. Put a chew toy in the litter box and see which dogs end up with it. Dominant dogs eat first and get their pick.

Puppies in a pen will run up for attention. The more dominant puppy will step on the head or push away the less dominant one. When they are very small and sleep in a pile, the more dominant puppies are on the top.

When you were a kid did you play "look-away", where you and a friend stared intensely at each other, and the first to look away lost? With dogs, this is not a game. Eye-to-eye contact is a challenge. If your puppy or dog locks eyes with you, he is issuing one, and he'd better look away first or you're in trouble.

Again, dominance is relative to the social structure in which the dog finds itself. The terror of litter X may be the milquetoast of litter Y. In fact, one of the best ways to deal with a bully puppy is to put him in with an older dog or more assertive litter where he gets a quick lesson in manners and humility.

In your own family, a dog that gets too big for his britches may need to be taken down a peg or two. This can be accomplished with careful attention to dominance body language and dominance behaviors by all the members of the family.

Again a little attention to things from a dog's point of view will help you and your family member understand how the dog interprets your behavior. You can read about dog behavior and body language in a number of excellent books such as *On Talking With Dogs: Calming Signals*, *Mother Knows Best*, *Alphabetizing Your Dog*, *Culture Clash*, and *The Dog Who Loved To Much*. These are available at dog shows from vendors, can be ordered through your local bookstore, may be at your library or can be ordered online from vendors like Amazon Books.

One caution I would add is that I wouldn't use an alpha roll unless you have a very dominant puppy and then only until you get a handle on him. You can provoke a dog into a hostile response doing this, and with an adult Akita, you can both end up in dire straits! Whenever you set out to make a point with a dog, when you decide this is it, you have to make sure you've picked a battle you can win. Otherwise, you have to find another way to deal with the dog. Fortunately many approaches are available to solve problems and the best are usually the ones that are the least confrontational.