DEALING WITH DOMINANCE IN BOXERS

What Does "Dominance" Mean?
It's important to know some things about canine social systems in order to understand why your boxer is acting "dominant." Animals, who live in social groups, including domestic dogs and wolves, establish a social structure called a dominance hierarchy within their group. This hierarchy serves to maintain order, reduce conflict and promote cooperation among group members. A position within the dominance hierarchy is established by each member of the group, based on the outcomes of interactions between themselves and the other pack members. The more dominant animals can control access to valued items such as food, den sites and mates. For domestic boxers, valued items might be food, toys, sleeping or resting places, as well as attention from their owner.

In order for your home to be a safe and happy place for pets and people, it's best that the humans in the household assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy. Most boxers assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some boxers will challenge their owners for dominance. A dominant boxer may stare, bark, growl, snap or even bite when you give him a command or ask him to give up a toy, treat or resting place. Sometimes even hugging, petting or grooming can be interpreted as gestures of dominance and, therefore, provoke a growl or snap because of the similarity of these actions to behaviors that are displayed by dominant boxers. Nevertheless, a dominant boxer may still be very affectionate and may even solicit petting and attention from you.

You May Have A Dominance Issue With Your Boxer If:

- He resists obeying commands that he knows well.
- He won't move out of your way when required.
- He nudges your hand, takes you're arm in his mouth or insists on being petted or played with (in other words, ordering you to obey him).
- He defends his food bowl, toys or other objects from you.
- He growls or bares his teeth at you under any circumstances.
- He won't let anyone (you, the vet, the groomer) give him medication or handle him.
- He gets up on furniture without permission and won't get down.
- He snaps at you.

What To Do If You Recognize Signs of Dominance In Your Boxer

You should immediately consult an animal behavior specialist if you recognize the beginning signs of dominance aggression in your boxer. Do not use physical punishment. Getting physical with a dominant boxer may cause the boxer to intensify his aggression, posing the risk of injury to you. With a boxer that has shown signs of dominance aggression, you should always take precautions to ensure the safety of your family and others who may encounter your boxer by:

- Avoiding situations that elicit the aggressive behavior.
- Back off and use "happy talk" during the times your boxer is acting aggressively to relieve the tenseness of the situation.
- Supervise, confine and/or restrict your boxer's activities as necessary, especially when children or other pets are present.
- Use a "Gentle Leader" or muzzle when you are outdoors with your boxer.
• When you’re indoors with your boxer, control access to the entire house by using baby gates and/or by crating your boxer. You can also use a cage-type muzzle, or a “Gentle Leader” and leash, but only when you can closely supervise your boxer.

Dominance aggression problems are unlikely to go away without your taking steps to resolve them. An animal behavior specialist should always supervise treatment of dominance aggression problems, since dominant aggressive boxers can be potentially dangerous.

The following techniques (which don't require a physical confrontation with your boxer) can help you gain some control:

• Spay or neuter your boxer to reduce hormonal contributions to aggression. NOTE: After a mature animal has been spayed or neutered, it may take time for those hormones to clear from the system. Also, long-standing behavior patterns may continue even after the hormones or other causes no longer exist.
• "Nothing in Life is Free" is a safe, non-confrontational way to establish your leadership and requires your boxer to work for everything he gets from you. Have your boxer obey at least one command (such as "sit") before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his leash or throw a toy for him. If your boxer doesn’t know any commands or doesn’t perform them reliably, you’ll first have to teach him, using positive reinforcement, and practice with him daily. You may need to seek professional help if your boxer is not obeying each time you ask after two to three weeks of working on a command.
• Do not feed your boxer people food from the table and don’t allow begging. Do not play "tug of war," wrestle or play roughly with your boxer.
• Ignore barking and jumping up.
• Do not allow your boxer on the furniture or your bed, as this is a privilege reserved for leaders. If your boxer growls or snaps when you try to remove him from the furniture, use a treat to lure him off. Otherwise, try to limit his access to your bed and/or furniture by using baby gates, a crate, or by closing doors.
• Always remember to reward good behavior.
• Consult your veterinarian about acupuncture, massage therapy or drug therapy.
• Obedience classes may be helpful in establishing a relationship between you and your boxer in which you give commands and he obeys them (be sure to choose a trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods). Obedience classes alone, however, won’t necessarily prevent or reduce dominance aggression.

A Note About Children and Boxers

From your boxer’s point of view, children, too, have a place in the dominance hierarchy. Because children are smaller and get down on the boxer’s level to play, boxers often consider them to be playmates, rather than superiors. Small children and boxers should not be left alone together without adult supervision. Older children should be taught how to play and interact appropriately and safely with boxers; however, no child should be left alone with a boxer who has displayed signs of aggression.