

Alpha Schmalfa

A lazy Saturday afternoon, the dog park. My youngest pup instigates a vigorous game of chase with a Great Dane and soon the Dane plays roughly. The owner walks over, throws the dog to the ground and slaps it across the face. It's the second time in a week I see harsh "got-ta-show-my-dog-who's-boss" treatment. Unaffected, my dog quickly runs back for more, but I feel so uncomfortable I leave.

I'm a proponent of a kinder, gentler approach.

Alpha-dominance training is based on a decades-old, debunked theory of wolf pack behavior that, sadly, is still touted as "the way." Two salient points: The pack model with its dominance component has been discredited by its very promoter. Scientific study of wolves now concurs that wolf behavior resembles a family more than a pack; wolves do not alpha-roll their young and growl in their faces until they submit. Next, and critically important, whatever wolves do, domestic dogs are not wolves.

Our canine sidekicks descended from the friendliest of ancient wolves, those with the shortest flight distance. Generation after generation of genetic selection for comfort with humans has made modern *canis familiaris* a whole different animal than her wild, many-times-great grandparents. Domestic dogs love us and want to please us; the urge has been cemented into their DNA over tens of thou-



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BY MARY MANDEVILLE, DC

sands of years of species development. Humans and canines have evolved as a working team, together, over time. We don't have to resort to ruling with an iron fist.

When I walk my dog on leash at Mt. Tabor, I am aware of what she gives up—the ability to run with a grace and speed I couldn't touch even in my youthful marathoning days, to follow her nose and exercise her own curiosity. I can choose to believe she's simply willful if she pulls on the leash in her enthusiasm to go, go, go. I can become frustrated and punitive if she tugs in an effort to drink in some delicious scents along the way. Or, I can choose to reward her for cooperating with my agenda instead of enjoying her own. I could take it further and make a conscious effort to be sure I meet not only my needs—safety, schedule, leash laws, lumbering two-legged gait, but hers as well—to fly like the wind, dash hither and yon, sniff the daily news, live in the moment. It's easier to be controlling than to struggle for effective two-way communication. But once I've made the choice to have and care for a dog, it's not just about my needs, it's about a relationship.

Relationship-based dog training strives to meet the needs of both the human and the dog. It's an empathetic approach, taking into account the dog's point of view. True, there are times when the dog's desire cannot be considered. Molly may want to chase the cat across the freeway, but she cannot be allowed to do so for her own safety. We can focus on making her happy she complied with us, rather than making her sorry she didn't.

It's a lot like raising children. We can choose a spare-the-rod and spoil-the-child approach and intimidate children into compliance. Or we can provide food and shelter, learning opportunities and loving kindness and enjoy the kids' company. It's easy to figure out which method will reap the most rewards for everyone in the long run.

Years ago, I started out with choke chains and alpha-rolls on professional advice. One look at my yellow lab-and-beagle mix—her eyes wide and ringed with white, tail tucked between her legs and ears plastered to her head—and I decided if this was training, I'd put up with a poorly behaved but happy dog.

Turns out, that wasn't necessary. Over time,

I've found dogs will respond to a pretty simple program—great food, plenty of exercise (off-leash play is *required*), things to chew and lots of social interaction with people and other dogs. A little formal training thrown in, reinforced with rewards and—and *voilà!*—dogs who come when called, sit nicely for treats, leave gross stuff alone when asked, pee and poop outside and, for the most part, don't eat the house and furnishings.

Treating dogs like their needs matter has as much to do with how it shapes our character as it does with how it helps our dogs. For me, the lesson applies to relationships with my partner, friends and children. Sure, I could alpha-roll them into submission. They'd probably be more compliant than they are now. But robbed of the best my dogs (partner, friends, children) have to offer, my spirit would be diminished.

The alpha-dominance paradigm is still spouted as if it were gospel. Next time you hear it, give it a miss. Try a relationship-based approach instead. You'll still be head honcho, but your dog will be happier and perform for you because he *wants* to.

What kind of friend and leader do you want to be? ☐

MARY MANDEVILLE is an animal chiropractor. Visit animotionchiro.com for more.

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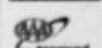
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