

Partnership and Attachment

Dogs have long been known to benefit humans, and the human-animal bond with dogs is of special interest. However, not all human-dog dyads exhibit a mutually beneficial relationship. Some dogs become subject to dominionistic owners, which causes welfare concerns for the dogs. By exploring attachment, trainers are better able to help their clients establish a beneficial partnership with their service dog prospect.

Partnership versus Dominance

Social dominance is an aspect of wolf, feral dog and domestic dog conspecific relationships. In the 1960s and 1970s, social dominance was hypothesized to be a temperament trait of dogs. Validation of temperament testing has disproven this idea. Social dominance is a quality of relationships, not of individuals. Social dominance behaviors are highly ritualized behaviors established to avoid conflict. In conspecific dyads—two individuals of the same species—of dogs, the younger individual is likely to display submissive behavior in deference to the older individual. Because of this, some ethologists propose using the term *junior-senior* to replace *dominant-submissive*. Social dominance behaviors in dogs do not transfer easily to human-dog relationships, and the confusion has potential to spawn dangerous dog behaviors, abusive human behaviors and failure to establish the secure attachment necessary between a handler and their service dog.

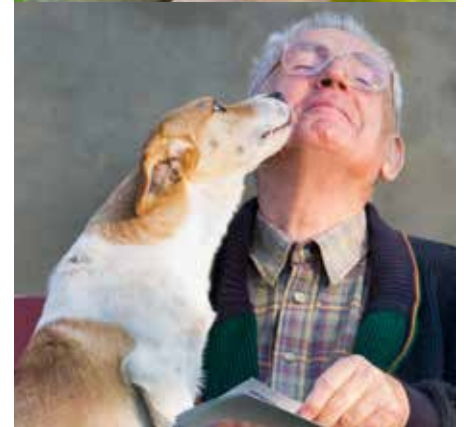
The most concerning misconceptions about social dominance come from the now-disproven ideas that dominant individuals exert forceful control over resources, such as food, and that dogs are constantly attempting to increase their dominance or status. The idea that dogs are constantly challenging the more dominant conspecific in order to gain rank has also been proven incorrect by ethology studies, but dog training methods originating from these ideas are still practiced.



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Wolf pups display junior behavior to their parents. Puppies and dogs display similar junior behavior to people, which is still sometimes misinterpreted as dominant behavior.

Social hierarchies between dogs develop bottom up. When competing for a food resource, for example, the more submissive dog in a dyad defers to the other dog, and this continues until one most dominant dog eats. However, a dog with a high motivational state disrupts this bottom-up social dominance—even the dog that is typically most dominant will defer to a highly motivated dog. This supports the understanding that social dominance behaviors are conflict-avoidance strategies.

In the past when this was not well-understood, trainers advised pet dog owners to assert “leadership” over their dogs by forcing the dogs into vulnerable positions such as the “alpha roll” or responding to puppy mouthing with violence and depriving dogs of food, water—even air. These abusive strategies do not produce submission in dogs because social dominance is not a top-down phenomenon. However, they often cause distrust, fear, learned helplessness and increased aggression by creating an artificial scarcity of resources and threatening or causing harm. This attitude toward dogs is termed *dominionistic*. It is counterproductive when training all dogs, and particularly harmful when a novice handler is raising a service dog prospect. It predicts high stress and poor welfare for dogs.

“When most people say they have a dominance problem, usually they mean one of two things: they have a compliance problem, or else the dog is biting or threatening them.”⁶

—Jean Donaldson
The Culture Clash

Creating a mutually beneficial human-animal relationship is a necessary component of service training. Social dominance-based theories fail to describe the partnership between a service dog and their handler.



“The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and wellbeing of both.”⁷

Attachment Styles

The current model for human-dog relationships is based on archaeological evidence, which suggests that dogs have evolved into a species that is dependent upon humans. Animal behaviorists have adopted a parent-child model of attachment theory. Attachment theory categorizes relationships into distinct types.

- **Secure attachment:** Dogs with secure attachment view their owners as safe, predictable and responsive to their communication. Their owner is their secure base for exploring the environment. They are likely to display calm and confident behavior when their handler is present. These dogs have lower cortisol levels.
- **Insecure attachment:** Dogs with insecure attachment have a strong attachment to their owner but with little trust. Their owner is inconsistently responsive or nonresponsive to their needs. Nonresponsive owners typically have anxious or avoidant attachment styles. Dogs with insecure attachment are sometimes described as “Velcro dogs.” When a dog with insecure attachment is with an owner with avoidant attachment, the dog is likely to display separation distress. Some models divide insecure attachments into several types, such as insecure-anxious, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent. Service dog prospects with insecure attachment may cause a great deal of distress to handlers with psychiatric symptoms.

A handler's insecure attachment to a service dog is not believed to be as problematic as a service dog's insecure attachment to her handler.

Attachment styles are learned and may be modifiable. An investigation of attachment styles of dogs participating in animal-assisted therapy demonstrated that half of the dogs in the study cohort changed attachment style from insecure attachment to secure attachment in a short period of time.

A handler's insecure attachment to a service dog may be a common feature in service dog teams. Preliminary investigation suggests a handler's insecure attachment to their service dog is associated with the handler's greater quality of life. Due to study limitations, it is difficult to draw conclusions that might help trainers influence the attachment between their client and their client's dog. A handler's insecure attachment to a service dog is not believed to be as problematic as a service dog's insecure attachment to her handler.



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Common Bonding Myths

“It doesn’t matter how my dog bonds with me, as long as we love each other.”

In service dog prospects, the attachment *style* is critical to a dog’s successful graduation and service dog career. The secure attachment style is necessary for a service dog to perform his job and be an excellent companion or stable presence for his handler. Insecure attachment style predicts inconsistent work ethic and dismissal, especially in psychiatric service dogs.

“Bonding with my dog will make it task.”

Bonding is not a prerequisite for tasking. Dogs perform animal-assisted therapy, detect cancer and infections in people they have never met. Psychiatric service dog prospects are frequently distracted by psychiatric symptoms in strangers. The myth that bonding ensures task behaviors is risky because it can reduce a client’s willingness to complete task training.

“Snuggling with my dog is bonding. When I get a new puppy, I should hold it and sleep with it as much as possible.”

Attachment is created with frequent interactions, such as training and playing games like fetch and tug, and consistent responsiveness to a dog’s needs and requests. Frequent use of positive reinforcement enhances bonding, while frequent use of punishment impairs bonding.

“If I feel close to my dog, my dog is bonded to me.”

Human-dog attachment is not mirrored. The bond a person feels with their dog does not reflect the attachment the dog feels toward the person.

“If my dog follows me everywhere, we have a good bond.”

A dog following their owner from room to room is a strong predictor of clinical behavior problems such as separation anxiety. Separation anxiety in dogs occurs when a dog has an insecure attachment to their owner and the owner has an avoidant attachment to their dog. A dog following her handler does not predict a secure attachment.

“If my dog doesn’t bond to me, there’s something wrong with my dog.”

If a dog displays insecure-avoidance attachment to a handler, it’s almost always a human problem. Either an unsuitable dog was selected for service training, or the dog has not been trained or handled correctly. If a dog isn’t bonded it’s likely that his handler is using positive punishment and/or is not meeting the dog’s needs.

“If my dog is good at service dog tasks, we will have a better bond.”

A survey of first-time service dog handlers suggested that handlers bond with their service dogs regardless of the dog’s performance. This may explain why dismissing a service dog prospect is a difficult emotional decision for handlers.

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“From an ethological perspective, attachment has been described as an affectionate tie between two individuals that promotes a balance of proximity seeking and independent activity/exploration.”⁸



Partnership in Multiple-Human Households

Most dogs in a multiple-human household have a stronger attachment with one household member. Dogs demonstrate the strongest bond to the person they have the most frequent interactions with, particularly interactions in which the person is providing a resource or access to a pleasant activity, such as feeding or walking. In a study with a small sample size, walking appeared to be the most influential activity to strengthen bonding. Instruct handlers to interact and train with their dog frequently, while minimizing interactions between their service dog prospect and other household members.



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Households with Children

Many service dogs live in a household with children. Parents/guardians must follow the same safety guidelines as when a pet dog lives with children. Interaction between a service dog prospect and children in the household is not necessary. However, a dog needs to be trained to obey safety cues from children, such as Back, Off, Go and Down, and to tolerate body handling from children. Protect dogs' resources from children and children's items from dogs.

- ▶ **Birth to 2 years old:** Infants are at the highest risk of fatal dog attacks because of their fragility. Dogs' predatory behavior drives the majority of fatal dog attacks in this age group. Service dogs should be handled with the same degree of caution as any other dog. No interaction is necessary.
- ▶ **2-4 years old:** Toddlers and preschoolers are at the highest risk of dog bites. Children must be taught to interact safely with dogs, with hand-over-hand supervision. Physical barriers such as kennels and doors must be used to separate children from a dog's feeding, resting and chewing resources and locations. Children this age can learn to ignore a service dog when it is wearing working gear, using the simple rule "Gear On, Hands Off."
- ▶ **5-12 years old:** Interactions between children and a service dog in the household are not necessary, but older children may share in animal care responsibilities if their parent/guardian prefers.
- ▶ **13 and up:** Some teenagers can be responsible dog walkers in low distraction environments.



Partnership with a Minor Child

Partnering a service dog with a minor is a controversial topic in the service dog community. Trainers and programs vary in their perceptions of what ages and abilities of children benefit from a service dog. Programs that train service dogs for children with autism may partner dogs with children as young as 7 years old. Typically, these dogs only work under the parent's supervision and do not attend school with the child. Most service dog training programs set their minimum age for human partners between 12 and 18 years of age; some programs will not partner dogs with anyone younger than 12. Some programs place career-change dogs who are *not* service dogs with children for animal-assisted therapy. These dogs benefit children who are not yet capable of working with a service dog.

When a service dog is partnered with a minor child, the child's parent/guardian is the dog's handler and is responsible for training. Because parents/guardians who are training have more and frequent reinforcing interactions with their dogs, the dogs tend to bond to the parent who does the training more than to the child they are intended to benefit. This does not necessarily mean that the dog cannot be an effective service dog for the child. When partnering a service dog with a minor child,

- encourage the child to play with or walk with their dog.
- assign ability-appropriate training homework or games to the child.
- advise the parent/guardian to practice periods of low interaction and separation from the dog.

Teenage minors who are capable of being responsible for their dog's needs and respecting the property and preferences of others might be able to owner-train a service dog with minimal guidance or assistance from their parent/guardian.