

Is Your Dog Trying to Dominate You and What You Can Do About It

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Hi, everyone. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I am Susan Garrett, and today I have got a somewhat spicy topic to talk about. And it comes from one of you listeners. And the question came in, "Could you please discuss the role of an alpha dog and a beta dog in your house?" And for those who may not be aware, by way of an alpha dog, the inferences, it's the number one dog in the house, or the beta is the number two dog in the house. And all of this goes back to dominance theory, which is the theory of training that is based on the belief on how wolves interact. Which has been disproven by any scientists who have actually studied the behavior of wolves. But I digress.

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With dominance theory, there is a pack leader. The human is the pack leader. And there are times in their relationship with their dog where they must express their dominance and have that dog submit to them. 30 years ago, this was the way the vast majority of pet dog classes were run, that people were trained this way. And really it came from people's lack of understanding of science is really it started and it's like a myth and it just kept going.

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Today the most popular presenter in the dominance theory dog training is of course the dog whisperer, Cesar Millan. I'm not here to say what's right and what's wrong. I'm here today to suggest that each of us has a filter that we see the world through. There isn't a right or a wrong, there's a right for us and a wrong for us.

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So, our reality, our perception of what reality truly is, is made up of many, many layers that create the filter that we see the world through. So, the reality might be a clear picture, but for somebody like me, one layer of the filter is the fact that I came from a family of two very loving parents who were very much in love and I never heard my father raise his voice, that I was never physically hit as a child. I was never grounded. I was, the way they parented was very, very different.

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My filter, I have a, another layer that is, I am the sixth of nine children. That creates a different version of the world for me. The fact that I'm dyslexic. The books I read, people like John Wooden and Zig Ziglar and Dr. Wayne Dyer. These are all people who have influenced the filters that I look through the world through. And that's obviously influences the filter that I look at dogs through. The same is true for somebody like Cesar Millan. He has his own history that has created the filters to which he looks through dogs today.

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So, my filter is one of empathy and kindness and looking for correct choices with our dogs and how I can lead with joyful energy, that's the presentation. When something goes wrong it's what did I do? What could I do better? Where dominance theory, you look at, what did you do as far as the dog? What did you do? What should you have done?



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So, it's a different approach, a different way of looking at how you approach your training. There are things that there are, that we have in great common. So, number one, in the dominant theory basis, there's a belief that you need to have great clarity with what your expectations are with your dog. And I believe that wholeheartedly. Number two, they believe that dogs need consistent exercise. And absolutely I'm constantly preaching that daily exercise, you know, ideally an hour to two hours a day of exercise for every dog out there is ideal. Number three is we both believe that you as the trainer needs to be calm and confident. Now they would use the word assertive I would use the word confident.

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And where we digress now in our approach for dog training is, I believe that dogs need choices and in training my job is to make the correct choices to be the obvious choice for the dog. And the consequence of choosing incorrect, it falls on me rather than on the dog. So, I googled in preparation for this podcast. I googled dominance theory in dog training and I just clicked on the first blog post that I came up with. It was not the dog whisperers. It was somebody else talking about dominance theory and they had a list of ways you could tell if your dog is showing dominance or trying to show dominance over you.

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Now, if you're just jumping in the middle of this podcast, I do not agree with this. All right. So, here's a list of the ways they suggested your dog is showing dominance. If your dog barks at you, if your dog pulls on a leash, if your dog bothers you while you're trying to eat dinner, if your dog jumps on you or your guests, if your dog herds your children, if your dog pushes ahead to go through doors first, or if your dog ignores what you say to them, your cues or your commands.

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If your dog mounts you or mounts other dogs, they're trying to show dominance. That's just such a misbelief. That's— let's just stop for a second. Dogs who are humping it more often than not it's anxiety, stress, or excitement. It's rarely something sexual, unless there's a dog in season and it's an intact male. And it is not a dog trying to be your boss. Okay. I digress. All right. I could do a whole podcast on dominance theory belief, what your dog is really trying to tell you here. So, I'll keep going. If your dog's on the couch and you try to move them from their favorite spot, that's him showing dominance. All right.

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So, there's two sides to every story. The dominance theory looks at a dog and they say, it's willful, looking at that list, it's stubborn, it's pushy, the dog's blowing you off. Now in the same situation, I would look at it and I would say the dog is confused or uneducated, you could say that's the same thing. That the dog is fearful or they're anxious or stressed, same thing, maybe. That the dog has maybe overexcited or they're over tired or they're overwhelmed in the environment that they're in right now.

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Imagine if you are walking at the park and your dog sees another dog and it gets all puffy and it starts to growl and you call him, "Rover come. Rover, come." And the dog doesn't blink. Doesn't, just keeps a focus on that dog and keeps growling. Now you could say he's blown me off. He's being willful. He's being stubborn.



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You're looking at that dog and in your mind the dog's saying, "Hey, talk to the hand. Talk to the hand, got my eyes on this dog." Now, if you were looking through a different filter, instead of the dog being willful, stubborn, pushy, blowing you off, if you thought the dog was fearful or confused or uneducated or anxious or overwhelmed and he's actually saying, "Take my hand. Take, take, take my hand. I'm, I'm worried. Take my hand. I need your help here."

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Can you imagine what you would do? If your filter says your dog saying, "Talk to the hand." what is your response? Your ego takes over and says, "Yeah. Talk to my hand." But if your filter says your dog's saying, "Take my hand. I'm a little bit worried." imagine what your actions would be. Imagine if you had a toddler saying, "Take my hand, I'm worried." and you scolded them because you thought they were blowing you off. Do you see how your filter affects your choices?

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And sometimes it's hard and a lot of times this isn't your fault. It's your culture or your experience that has created the responses that you have. So, you may have been raised in a culture that is quick to judge and quick to blame and quick to maybe give a backhand or, you know, yell. If that has been the environment that you've been raised in and so that has helped form your filter.

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I want to make sure that you know that you, you can change, and you need to let go of any shame or guilt of what your responses are. Because I look at it as this, every time we're faced with another one of those situations where we look at our dog, especially those of you who are trying to move from a more force based dog training to something that's more positive.

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And you have these things that come up and you end up just grabbing the dog by the collar and giving them a shake. And then you go, "Ahh, that's not what I wanted to do. Oh, that wasn't acting in the way that I really want to create a relationship with my dog." Just know that all that was, was just a little test to let you know, it's the universe saying, "How are you so far? Are you acting Zen-like when you're faced with challenges? Okay. No big deal. Keep working on it. I'll bring you up another one soon."

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And it always does. It always appears, doesn't it? Years ago, or actually not that many years ago, a couple of years ago I got a phone call from a friend. Now her and her husband, very conservative family. They have five children and they're Born Again Christians and they are, she called me because her 18-year-old was being spiteful and willful and about to ruin her life. And she wanted my advice. Now I'm going to preface this by saying, I am not a parent, but my friend understands that I understand behavior.

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And so, what was going on was the 18-year-old was dressing in a way they didn't approve of. Ripped jeans and bare midribs and stuff like that. And she was just finishing her senior year in high school and decided she was going to take a year off before she went to college. And her mother who was talking to me was saying, "Well look, you know what it's— she's living under our roof. She needs to follow our rules. And I think we need to lay down the law."



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“What do you think Susan, do you not agree? I'm just calling because I'm wondering if there's something I'm missing.” Again reminder, you know, I'm not a therapist, I'm a dog trainer but I will give you my take. Number one, I would ask, “What is the goal for you?” If the goal is to set an example for the other four children living in your home, to know they should toe the line, then your approach I believe would help create that. But at what cost? Because the respect you would gain from those children would be respect through fear.

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Now, if your goal, which I can only guess that most parents goal is for your child to be number one, safe, number two, happy. Or the other way around. Number one, happy, number two, safe then I would take a different approach. I would create an opportunity for your child to have a choice and to choose what you want, make it incredibly attractive.

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So, I would ask questions and I would share your point of view. “You know, your father and I dress very differently than you. And my number one goal is for you to be happy. I just wanted you to know how uncomfortable it makes us to see you dressing that way and wonder if there's any middle ground that we could come to.” And let her share with you, “Well I designed this look myself and I'm really, I want to go to design school and I'm really proud of this. And so, I want to take a year off to work with some intern, with some designers before I get into college.” Doesn't that change everything? Check your filter.

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Now, what do you do when you're in the moment? So recently, if you're on social media, you may have seen my naughty pants and I use that and quote, because our puppies aren't naughty, they're just being puppies. So, she had shredded a bed in her ExPen. I'd left her alone for 20 minutes while I was training another dog and she shredded her ExPen, shredded her bed.

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She's having a great old time in there. Now, the problem is that could be very dangerous if she ingested any of it. So, but when in the middle what can you do? Number one thing you do is I want to keep my dog safe and I'd like to accomplish my goals. So, what I did was I got her out of the ExPen. Well, first I took a [little video](#) of what she was doing for social media.

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You know, that goes back to [podcast number 43](#) on ‘Can a dog be happy and well-behaved?’ It's being Zen and looking at what's happening. And number one is I want to make sure my dog is safe and then accomplish what I want, which is for her not to eat anymore of the stuffing. So, what I did was I got her out of there and I put her in a crate, threw a couple of cookies in there.

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She's happy, she's safe. Now I can go about cleaning that mess up. The number two thing that you're going to do is you're going to say, “Where did I go wrong?” Where did I go wrong, and was it the education I gave that puppy? Or your dog? Was it the environment that I put them in? In this case, it was clear that I gave her all these things to choose from and I went and trained another dog where she could hear me and she got excited and that's the end of it.



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Or was it a little bit of both? Education, environment or was it both? So, you need to decide. So, in the moment you want to, A - keep your dog safe. Number two is, start to do a check, where did I go wrong? Number three would be, how could I do better? Now let's come up with a plan. You need to have a trigger. And that trigger is 'when I feel furious it's time to get curious'. So, when I feel like I'm seeing my dog and I'm thinking that they might be, you know, giving me the doggy digit, as somebody has named it, you need to get curious.

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So, what does my plan look like? Number one is to manage the environment. And that goes back to [podcast number 6](#), where I talked about the art of manipulation. Manipulating the environment so that the dog makes the choices that you would like to see that dog make. Number two in my plan is to constantly observe what's going on.

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Now if it was a dog looking at the dog in the park, I would refer back to [podcast number 16](#), the thing before the thing. What was the thing before the thing? In any instance. Now with my dog shredding her bed, the thing before the thing was me training another dog, her having all this freedom, maybe I didn't give her enough exercise that day, I don't think that was it but that was it.

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So, you're going to look at the thing before the thing. Also look at [podcast number 42](#) on behavior chains. Did you actually reinforce the dog somewhere for not— for doing what you don't want them to do? So, you're managing, you're observing. Number three is how can I motivate better choices?

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How can I motivate my dog for the us to be on the same page? And for me, that goes back to layers of learning that comes in the form of games. That would be our [Home School the Dog](#) program, or our [Recallers](#) program. Those of you who are in those programs, you are doing the right thing. You are laying down that foundation so that the choice you want your dog to make is absolutely clear.

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Number four is what will I reward when I see what I want. What is it that I'm going to reward? So, if I walk by that ExPen, I'm going to reward my puppy if she's chewing on a chewy stick. I'm also going to train closer to the ExPen so I can watch her and reward her for not attacking her beds.

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All right. Number five would be, if you have a serious problem, absolutely seek out the help of a Certified Animal Behaviorist. And don't wait until you're overwhelmed. Do that sooner. Long before you get into huge problems. Training is about, as I mentioned in [podcast number 44](#), arranging coincidences. You want to arrange coincidence.

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So, what your dog wants is really what you want. Go back and listen to some of those podcasts that I've mentioned and consider the filter you're seeing the world through. Release the blame and judgment and consider what do you want to replace them with? I'd suggest empathy and kindness. It's all a journey.





Episode: #46

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None of us is perfect. There are times when I get frustrated, just the same way as you, you need to rehearse the behaviors that you would like to see yourself doing in the future. That's it for today. I'll see you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Quick video of This! shredding her bed \(on Facebook\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 43: Can a Dog be Happy and Well Trained?](#)

[Podcast Episode 6: The Art of Manipulation](#)

[Podcast Episode 16: The Thing Before Your Dog's Thing](#)

[Podcast Episode 42: Behavior Chains: Are You Teaching Your Dog to be Bad to be Good?](#)

[Home School the Dog](#)

[Recallers](#)

[Podcast Episode 44: Using Coincidences and Positive Associations in Dog Training](#)



Is Your Dog Trying to Dominate You and What You Can Do About It

About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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