

Benign Leadership

By Tim Garner

Dogs instinctively are pack animals and their pack is comprised of all the animals in their home – including humans. They prefer an obvious leader or they may step in to fill the void. When a dog is allowed to become the pack leader, behavior problems often appear including: aggression, barking, and not following commands. When humans are viewed by the dog as having a higher rank in the pack, the dog is normally happy, well behaved, and a joy to be around.



To become a pack leader you must understand how dogs decide who is a leader. The leader is usually the biggest and strongest dog. The leader eats first and then allows the others to eat and determines what they eat. The leader gets the best spots and usually sits in a place above the other dogs. The leader is the first to greet or check out newcomers to the pack. In general, the leader is in charge.

Cavaliers are a soft, unaggressive breed and normally will give in easily to the more confident owner. With a Cavalier, treats are great tools to correct a dog's behavior. However, in households where there are children, it is still important to ensure that a Cavalier knows where it is in the pecking order. Small children are less confident and knowledgeable around dogs and need to be taught how to handle dogs. Remember, dogs are a reflection of your leadership and small dogs have a tendency to get away with things larger dogs would not.

Now that you have a basic understanding of what a leader is, let's talk about some common things you can do to be viewed as a pack leader in your house. (Every human in your house needs to be viewed as out-ranking the dog, so teaching children how to act around dogs is very important to having a well behaved dog as well). This is a very brief explanation of being a benign leader. If you need more information than presented here, please do a Google search for Pack Leader or Alpha Dog for hundreds of pages of information about becoming a benign leader.

Below are some of the ways you may want to become a pack leader in your house:

- Have scheduled feedings at set and regular times. Free feeding is a poor practice for a number of reasons, including leadership. If a dog has not eaten all its food in 20 minutes, remove the food.

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- Encourage the dog to respond to a command before eating. For example, tell the dog to go in its kennel/crate and sit quietly. Others use a Sit and Stay, Leave It, or Wait command as they place the food on the ground and then release the dog to eat.
- If you have multiple dogs, always feed the same dog first, as this is another form of keeping order in the pack.
- Sit down at your table (with your family) and eat before you feed your dog. Humans should eat before the dog(s), as the leader eats first and eats the best food.
- If possible, greet people before you greet your dog(s).



- Children are better off on the furniture with the dog next to them or with the dog on the floor.
 - Reward your dog with treats or praise when he/she listens to you; do not keep repeating yourself! Dogs hear much better than we do. He/she heard you. Now is the time to back up your command with action. (See General Training Tips)
- Sit down on the couch before your dog does. If a dog runs into a room and jumps on a chair, tell it to get down (or pick it up and place it on the floor), and praise it for doing so. Then you sit down, and invite the dog back up and praise it again. You will be particularly glad you've done this when visitors come!
 - If your dog is lying in your way, do not walk around the dog. Either have the dog move, and praise it when it does so, or walk over it. Humans should always have the right of way. This is another one to watch for when dealing with children.

As you can see from the earlier points, routine and habit are important. Remember, there are many ways to be viewed as a leader in your house. Some things you may choose not to do and other things you may want to do. The feeding activities are considered by many to be the most important leadership activity with Cavaliers, as most of them are extremely food motivated.

Here are three points to remember when working with your Cavalier:

1. Don't set your dog up to fail through lack of supervision. Teach your dog; don't punish.
2. Be consistent with your rules and expectations.
3. Do not yell at your dog or hit your dog.

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Once again, please look up being a pack leader on the internet for more information. You can also watch programs like “It’s Me or the Dog” with Victoria Stillwell. The leadership you provide your dog depends on you!