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Are you still trying to be your pack's alpha dog? Would you like to hear what the guy responsible for the idea in the 1970s has to say about it today?

“At that time that's all that science knew. In the last 35 years

we've learned an awful lot about animal behavior. One of the things we learned is that the term "alpha" is incorrect," said Dr. L. David Mech, a leading wolf expert and a senior research scientist for the U.S. Department of the Interior.

In other words, if you or your dog's trainer are still trying to shape your dog's behavior with alpha rolls, shock collars, leash snaps, harsh commands and an insistence on absolute obedience... you're using techniques that were roundly discredited by science decades ago.

The latest research shows that your dog sees you not as his drill sergeant but, in fact, as his parent. Which is what Mech finally concluded was going on in wild wolf packs, too — the pack leaders were the mother and father of the other wolves in the pack.

"Abusive" is what we'd call a human parent who slammed a son or daughter over on their back to make them mind. Yet many trainers today are paid to do this to your dog or to teach you how to, insisting that dogs are like wolves and that this is how wolves instill compliance.

Not surprisingly, it damages your bond with your dog and confuses them. It *can* lead to fear biting and aggression. It's counterproductive with any dog, but if you live with a large dog like an Irish wolfhound, are you sure you want to be teaching your dog to distrust and fear you?

Mech published *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species* in 1970. It was a hit. The book was

republished in paperback in 1981 and remains in print, much to Mech's regret. He tried but failed to convince the publisher to cease further reprints.

He based it in part on his observations of wolves on Michigan's Isle Royale National Park and incorporated the findings of Rudolph Schenkel's 1947 paper, "Expressions Studies on Wolves." Schenkel's research was on captive wolves in Switzerland's Zoo Basel in the 1930s and 40s.

The theory was this: wolves are naturally inclined to dominate one another, and the strongest, most forceful member of the pack fights his way to the top and becomes its "alpha." He remains at the top of the heap through sheer force.

It became wildly popular with dog trainers who told their clients that dogs are essentially wolves and that the "natural" way to train a dog is to become the dog's alpha leader. Some trainers took the notion to the extreme, instructing their clients to never let their dog walk through a door first. Never let them lie on the couch with you and never ever let a dog win a game of tug. Break any of these rules and it's a signal to Fifi that you're a weak, unfit leader and the next thing you know, she'll take over the house to keep the place from going to hell in a handbasket.

There are a couple of problems with this. One, even if the theory were true, you're not a dog. Your *dog* doesn't think you're a dog. You can't mimic a dog's body language or his intricate system of [calming behaviors](#) designed to keep

harmony in the pack. Step in with your “alpha dog” theories and your dog will be pretty sure that you’re irrational, unpredictable and maybe a threat.

Second, dogs are not wolves. The two animals split thousands of years ago. The dog evolved into the perfect companion for humans. They look to us to assist and take care of them. They look to us for leadership. You don’t have to resort to force. More on this later...

Mech published a second groundbreaking book in 1999, “Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs.” It was based on considerable observations of wolves in the wild, not in zoos or places like [Isle Royale](#) where wolf packs were stressed by inbreeding and sickness.

His revised theory of wolf pack said that in a wolf pack, there are indeed two dominant figures, a male and a female. They rarely use violence. They don’t insist on mindless obedience. They’re the mother and father of the pack.

“Any parent is dominant to its young offspring, so “alpha” adds no information. Why not refer to an alpha female as the female parent, the breeding female, the matriarch, or simply the mother?” said Mech.

Meanwhile, researchers at the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, Austria recently delved into how dogs see their humans and found a similar dynamic. They call their theory the “secure base effect.”

Just as children use their parents as a “secure base” when

exploring their environment, dogs rely on us for assurance and security in learning about the world around them. For those of you who call your dogs your “fur kids,” you’re not far off. Our dogs look to us and rely on us.

Even your Irish wolfhounds...

You’ll only find the rare wolfhound in obedience trials or agility competitions. They’re a little independent. For a dog bred to hunt large and dangerous game apart from its handler, this should be no surprise. They think for themselves. They’re highly intelligent. And they *can* be trained.

But please don’t use force. Wolfhounds, like children, are tightly bonded to their humans. Like children, harsh handling and words can confuse them and cause them to shut down. Love them, respect them and gently, firmly ask that they get off the couch, or stop pulling you down the sidewalk. Reward them when they mind. Praise them and give them a food treat. Be prepared to do this many times. Because they love you and really do want to please you, eventually force-free, reward-based training *will* succeed.

And, most important, you’ll still be close friends.