

Degu Domination: **Why your degu shouldn't be the boss of you**

Article by Chloe Long

Degutopia frequently gets asked about dominance behaviours between cohabiting degus. Degus are highly social mammals and thrive on interaction between other members of their group, building up small communities of degus that have a close bond to each other. In every degu community, there is a hierarchical structure or 'pecking order', including between our pets. This pecking order denotes the rank of each degu and thus their position within the group, maintaining a smooth-running system with little disruption. In fact, any community in which there is no structure is highly unstable and prone to breakdown, and will cause the animals stress. This is even true of human communities, as we too are social animals existing in a hierarchical structure. It is therefore natural for all degus to immediately establish a social rank when introduced to a new degu or group, which is usually confirmed by a fight. Fighting is in fact a very useful way of determining rank, as only the strongest, most evolutionary fit degu will emerge triumphant and become 'top degu'. Of course, there are other levels in the hierarchy and each fight and participation of social interaction will determine which level of the group each degu exists in.

So what about our pet degus? We will often observe minor quarrels and tiffs among lifelong companions, signifying a disruption in the hierarchy. This most commonly occurs between degus that are very closely matched- in terms of size, strength and physical condition. In this case, once one degu has established dominance over the other, the inferior will constantly be challenging the superior's dominance in the hope they can become the boss. This leads to squabbling until some order is re-established. Such pairings are relatively unusual in pairs or more of degus, it is more common to see one degu that is clearly more dominant over the rest of the group, who are usually very submissive and challenges of authority are infrequent. However, it is such groupings that are likely to cause problems to the owners.

Many degu owners don't identify with their degus as their degus do with them. For example, an owner may view their pets purely as animals that live with them, or even as companions, but very rarely as a member of the group. It is quite remarkable that the degu can relate to humans as well as they do, and often form a bond with their owners as if they were another degu. Since many degus see their owners as a group member, they should remember that in their pet's eyes, they are assigned a place in their hierarchy. In such structures as previously mentioned, where one degu is boss and others purely submissive, the dominant degu can become a little 'power mad' and try and assert dominance over the bigger degu- that's you. If this occurs, the more dominant degu can start biting you whilst being handled and ignoring you whilst training and disciplining, something that may be happening without the owner's immediate awareness.

It is therefore essential that degu owners assert dominance over their degus from the outset. This should by no means involve fighting with them, as this can do serious damage to the human-degu relationship! Try to get into your degu's way of thinking. Remember that you are already bigger than them, a good start. Try to keep on top of any acts of defiance from your degus- whilst training, make sure your degu listens to your commands and don't reward any degu that ignores you- ignore them back. If your degu bites you whilst handling (make sure they're not scared- if your degu is used to handling there's no excuse for biting), you must immediately let them know that biting is wrong and they can't get away with it. To do this, gently but firmly hold your degu in both hands and carefully flip them over onto their back, so your hand is supporting their back and their belly is exposed. Your degu is most vulnerable in this position and it shows them that you are dominant over them. Make sure you hold your degu there for a few seconds until they have stopped squirming, and only put them down when they are still to reinforce the fact that you are the boss. You will find that once this has been done a few times, your degu will stop biting you as they know it is unacceptable and does not reinforce their dominant status.

You will find that being top degu results in happy pets, and as long as they always know you're the boss, you'll have no trouble from them. In fact, by asserting dominance you might find you develop a stronger bond with all your degus than you had before.