
SPATIAL BUBBLE! *By Maureen Ross, M.A., NBCC, RYT*

Have you ever been engaged in a conversation with someone who gets so close that you can feel his or her breath? Intimidating huh? You step back a foot, they move in on you. You step to the left; they follow, like they are trying to swallow you.

An “Everybody Loves Raymond” episode pops to mind when Rob was talking so closely to Raymond’s face that Ray said, “don’t do that unless you’re going to hang an air freshener from your nose”. As funny as this is, dogs have extremely sensitive olfactory cells and spatial boundaries.

Cultural diversification will lend itself to many different greeting rituals too. The dog’s greeting ritual is culturally different than ours. It should be respected especially when you are interacting with others whether it is out on a walk, on a therapy-visit, READ visit, with your veterinary staff, a groomer, trainer or massage therapist.

I invite you to consider that honoring a dog’s “spatial bubble” (SB), especially in a new environment, is very important to a dog’s well being. SB is the area in which a dog will decide who and how close another dog (or human) may approach. Previous association when someone encroached upon their “spatial bubble” may have been positive or negative in the dog’s perception.

It’s exciting to learn what your dog is saying by observing. Jim and Jamie Dutcher’s video, “Wolves at our Door” or Turid Rugaas’ “Calming Signals in Dogs” give good visuals on wolves and domesticated dogs interacting.

Dogs engage in over the neck, pyramid, sniffing, splitting, yawning, rolling, mouthing, pumping, humping, necking and other body bouncing behaviors. Some are fun, play behaviors, while others are hierarchical communication signals. A dog’s place in a pack can be safe or tense, depending on how well they learn to use these communication skills. Dogs use these same communication skills with humans, *only they can be misunderstood or neglected by owners/handlers.*

Context is an important consideration too. Dogs live in context, meaning that if you teach them to sit in one spot, you need to expand their horizons to each room and/or territory. Socialization is essential along with basic training, respect and trust between handler and dog.

APPROPRIATE DOG ETIQUETTE

A puppy (or dog) that has been continually socialized well in a variety of circumstances will interact more maturely with other dog and humans. These dogs instinctively know how to (or not) react. Some dogs may never want the company of other dogs and that’s okay too. If you are aware of this, then you can be preventative and/or avoid stressful situations for you and your dog! However, it is imperative that dogs accept at least some human touch. This is established through positive encounters and counter-conditioning.

Here are some dog etiquette rules that owners and/or anyone encountering an unknown dog **MUST** respect if they are going to reinforce positive, safe dog-to-dog or dog-to-human interactions

- Most dogs will interact better off-leash.
- On leash, try not to tug and verbalize every little emotion.
- Allow the dogs to interact w/o human interference as long as it is safe.
- Dogs in groups can be tricky: this is not an experience for the relaxed, lahdeedah owner. Dogs give off warning signs long before they detonate into growlies. If you are “zoning out”, don’t have your dogs interact with other dogs! Bringing your dog to a new environment is **NOT THE TIME** to play around with a flexi-lead. You are not being kind by allowing your dog to invade the space of a strange dog, not to mention the stress for owners.
- *Watch your dog!* A dog that knows how to interact will pick up on eye contact and body signals. Low growls, sometimes not audible to the human ear, will warn a dog (or human) to back off. If you hear it, honor it!
- Re-centering yourself and your dog by asking for a sit/stay, watch-me, pausing and taking a deep breath will help you refocus. Change your emotions and watch your dog change too. Calm usually begets calmness and vice versa. Standing their screaming, with arms flailing wildly, is likely to turn what could be a passing moment into atomic warfare.
- Don’t be a hero. For example, if a dog has never been to open event in park, proceed slowly, on a regular leash and give your dog (and others) a chance to assimilate.

A Few Pearls of Wisdom during a dog-to-dog Encounter

- 🕒 Being proactive goes a long way, but let's face it, stuff happens, oftentimes too quickly to prevent it. We can all learn to spot these signals and back off.
- 🕒 If an altercation happens, don't yell. If you are in a dog park or at an event (i.e. baseball game), be neutral, call or go and get your dog calmly. If you are at the vet's, again be calm/neutral. If necessary, have a time-out (outdoors). If you know your dog, be honest and be careful. Offer this information to others.
- 🕒 Establish your boundaries for yourself and your dog. This includes for those who come lollygagging up to you, half cocked, with their dogs at the end of a long leash, saying, "he's okay, he wants to play." These folks haven't a clue, so educate them.
- 🕒 Most dogs will growl and lunge at or roll the other dog until one submits (willingly rolls onto the back or goes away). With humans, the clue (signal) from the dog is in the body language. Watch their eyes. Are they bulging? Is the dog panting? Are the ears and tail tucked (depending on breed)? Is the back flew (lip) curled? Is the canine (big tooth) showing? If it is, clearly this is a sign to back off.
- 🕒 Dogs who haven't been socialized or practice "machismo" may inflict injury or be injured. This won't escalate to this point if you are aware of your dog or of the signs of stress. Be your dog's advocate. None of us likes everyone! Neither do our dogs.
- 🕒 Don't laugh! This sends a clear message that it's okay if your dog decks another dog or a human. Chances are this dog is dominating you as well! Time to see a good positive reward based trainer and/or behaviorist.

WHAT CAN THE WISE AND OBSERVANT OWNER DO?

Know your dog! Your dog is your best friend. Why would you want them to get hurt, hurt another dog or worse, a human? When two strange dogs are about to interact, it is your responsibility to be a leader, be proactive and make wise decisions, especially if your dog doesn't "get out much".

Be respectful of others who are relaxing or walking with their dogs. Be respectful of Veterinarians, Groomers, Massage Therapists and Trainers by simply being honest.

HUMAN APPROACH

Humans should approach a strange dog from the side, not head on or bent over. It is bad dog manners either dog-to-dog or human-to-dog to get in their face. A strange or fearful dog, may take action and snap. Carry a biscuit or a stick to throw (hoping the dog will chase it) if a strange dog approaches. Trainers can have a great tool called the "assess-a-hand". It makes far better sense to test a first-visit-dog client with an assess-a-hand before losing a finger!

On dog walks: If a dog approaches with an owner attached, be assertive and tell that owner that YOU PREFER THEY KEEP THEIR DOG AWAY FROM YOURS. It is a wise choice and your dog-given right.

If you are bringing your dog to the Vet or a Massage Therapist for the first or second time, be realistic. If you are nervous, your dog will sense this. If you are calm, your dog may not like the situation, but will tolerate it, especially if they know how to "watch-me" and "sit". You always have the choice of turning away from a questionable situation.

Desensitization begins early, slowly and solidly. Beginning at home by gently touching your dog from head to toe, then inviting others to do this, gently and slowly, will help. The rule of thumb: if you have an active puppy, touch slowly. If you have an older or lethargic dog, touch more briskly, not hard, to increase circulation and wake up those inner spirits. Generally, dogs do not appreciate being petted (that tap tap action on the head). Always ask others to have your dog sit, and let them give him a healthy treat. This will help develop a positive interaction.

A LITTLE RESPECT ♪ (sing-a-long to Aretha's song)

Next time you are walking, training, out playing or have company, remind yourself about the "talking in my face" scenario and be mindful of "spatial bubbles." We all have them. Ask yourself, "What would I like"? Then ask your dog, "What do you prefer?" Can't decide? Then, pause, breathe and sing Aretha Franklin's song "A Little Respect". It's what we all want in a language that we understand!