



SPATIAL BUBBLE: We all have them!

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Awareness Centered Training – ACT (Excerpt), Balance Relationship Education Well-Being

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, almost swallowing you up.

One of my favorite “Everybody Loves Raymond” shows, Rob was talking so closely to Ray’s face that Ray said, “Don’t do that unless you’re going to hang an air freshener from your nose”. Funny, yeah, sort of ... but not when it becomes offensive or scary, and especially to our dogs.

People and dogs have spatial boundaries. Intrinsicly, dogs have extremely sensitive olfactory cells numbering about 75 times greater than ours. They sniff in techno-color. Cultural diversification will lend itself to many different greeting rituals for people. The dog’s greeting ritual is different than ours but they have their own (body language) communication gestures that signal dos and don’ts.

It should be respected especially when you are interacting with others whether it is family, friends, children, strangers on a walk, with veterinary staff, groomer, and trainer or massage therapist!

I would like to invite you to consider something that is very important to you and to your dog’s well being; their spatial bubble. Each will have a different one depending on the nature, nurture, training and desensitization.

This is the area in which a dog will decide who and how close another dog (or human) may approach in a particular environment. It happens when dogs are going through transitions (rehomeing, recovering from illness, surgery, and trauma). Like us, they imprint through associations. Previous associations when someone encroached upon their “spatial bubble” may have been positive or negative from the dog’s perception, association and feeling. And, yes, dogs do have emotions. We humans need to recognize it in body speak.

It is exciting to learn what your dog is saying by observing body language and dogs at play. Jim and Jamie Dutcher’s dvd, “[Wolves at our Door](#)”, Turid Rugaas’ “[Calming Signals](#)”, [Dr. Ian Dunbar’s](#) Adult and Adolescent DVD and [Sarah Kalnajs](#), Body Language are worth a DVD party with popcorn and wine (or beverage of choice).

Dogs meet / greet by circling and sniffing. They engage with over the neck posturing, pyramid, splitting, yawning, rolling, mouthing, pumping/humping 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 may inadvertently be misunderstood or neglected.*

SUITABLE DOG ETIQUETTE

A puppy (dog) that has been socialized well in a variety of circumstances will interact more calmly and maturely with other dog and humans. These dogs instinctively know how to (or not) react. They will follow your cue on whether to alert, defend or be calm. Some dogs may never want the company of other dogs and that’s okay too. Being aware of this in our dogs is our responsibility as good dog parents.

It is imperative that dogs accept at least some human touch. They need to tolerate a Vet check, grooming and being attended too in time of injury and old age. This is created through positive, supervised encounters,

counter-conditioning (pairing something good with something spooky) and desensitization (gradual introduction to a variety of sights, sounds, smells and THINGS).

Here are some doggy manners that owners (everyone) must honor if they are going to reinforce positive, safe dog-to-dog or dog-to-human interactions:

- Be aware and know your dog's signals (hiding, pulling away, shaking, lying down and yes, growling). Growling is a dog's way of telling the perceived "intruder" that this is not "okay" for them.
- Train your puppy / dog from the get-go to sit in front of humans.
- Socializations and desensitization to sights, sounds and smells should begin safely, slowly, and then incrementally increase as the dog gets use to them.
- Introducing the dog to 100 peoples, places and things, on leash, by the time they are 6 months old is preferable. Adopted? Okay ... but begin – slow and easy!
- 10/5: Be aware of what's going on around you and your dog within 10 feet. Within 5-feet, ask before entering someone's spatial bubble.
- Be mindful of your emotions travelling down the leash to your dog. Most dogs will interact better off-leash (dog parks or safe areas), but there is no guarantee. You must be your dog's advocate.
- Allow the dogs to interact w/o human interference as long as it seems safe. Short off-leash sessions (1-3 minutes), then calling your dog will build up some anticipation while teaching them that just because they settle down for a moment does not mean plays over. If they do not come, walk over calmly; take the collar and leash up. You can let them go "explore" when they are calm / sitting.
- Re-center yourself and your dog by asking for a sit/stay, pausing and taking a deep breath. Change your emotions and watch your dog change too.
- Dogs in groups can be tricky: this is not an experience for the lahdeedah owner. Unplug, and remember to keep you scanner working. Watch your dog while engaging with other dogs.
- Dogs give off warning signs long before they detonate into fights. If you know your dog pack (meet up group), then you can relax. If you do not or a new dog joins the pack, zoning out (socializing while sucking on an iced coffee) may be dangerous.
- Growlies are a dog's communicate and coping skills. Learned well – it works. However, it can escalate to a fight if it goes beyond a comfortable threshold for your dog. Get to know your dog's comfort zone.
- Be proactive and it will help keep your dog from being "reactive" (barking, lunging).
- S.T.E.P. Watch your dog! Speak to your dog, touch your dog, keep your eye on your dog and watch the proximity of your dog with others (dogs, children, people and THINGS).
- Scan and switch your dog from one side to another.
- Redirect your dog to a calmer environment and position. Sometimes turning around is all that is needed to change the dog's fear / anxiety in the moment.

FEAR IN NEW SITUATIONS (dogs or yours)

We are all strong and weak, tough and fragile, smart and dumb, rough and gentle at times. We like some situations and not others. Dogs are the same. Not all dogs want to meet other dogs. Some are content to enjoy life on laps. Right or wrong, knowing our own expectations for our dogs, then giving them the opportunity to be dogs is, in my opinion, a fair relationship.

Dogs can be fearful when encountering something for the first time or after having bad associations in the past. The drives of chase, prey, fight, flight, freeze and appease can kick in at various times. Ask yourself what it would be like to be in an uncomfortable situation. What do you do ... clam up (passive aggressive), panic, stop breathing or self medicate? Dogs go into stress mode too, adrenaline and epinephrine pumping. They react the way dogs do by

C.L.A.R.I.T.Y.

*Compassion, Living and Learning,
Awareness, Relationship, Instinct,
Intuition, Trust and Teach
Yes to good behavior ...*

freezing, retreating, growling or shutting down. A well socialized dog may lie down in the face of too much energy. This is not a wuss dog. This dog is smart and saying, “Calm Down.”

With awareness, we can learn to spot signals in ourselves and our dogs. Learning when to “stop” and “breathe” is a life extender.

WHAT CAN THE WISE OWNER DO?

Try a little C.L.A.R.I.T.Y. Showing our dogs the same compassion we expect when learning something new or going into unfamiliar situations is the fair thing to do.

HOW TO APPROACH A DOG SAFELY BASED ON ENERGY FLOW

Begin at home, and early on, gently touching your dog from head to toe, s l o w l y. With strange dogs, ask first and/or do not approach. For more help and a great carry around brochure see Children and Dogs: Safe and W.A.I.T. at [Dog Talk](#)'s Learning Zone. Check out the body language charts for children and adults.

Balancing energy is the goal. If you have an energy flowing puppy or hyper dog, the common sense approach is to be calm and touch slowly. Give them something to occupy their busy mouths like a solid chew toy. Older or more lethargic dogs usually enjoy a brisk, more invigorating massage (touch). It increases circulation and wakes up those inner spirits. Dogs **do not enjoy** petting (bang, bang on the head). Try it on yourself. Gentle ear caressing and slow massage is more pleasant and natural.

It is bad *dog or human manners* to approach someone's spatial bubble head on. Side-ways, within a foot or more is more sensible. A strange or fearful dog, may take action and snap. If you have a strange dog encounter on a walk, carrying a biscuit or stick may help. Toss it. Otherwise, stand still or calmly redirect, going in another direction.

Confronting or yelling at an already “inflated” or “deflated” dog will make matters worse. Experienced professionals would have an [assess-a-hand](#) available to test dog tolerance (snapping, biting). This is a simple rubber hand (joke store) taped onto a stick. It makes far better sense to test a first-visit-dog with an assess-a-hand rather than losing a body part or having your face re-arranged.

On dog walks: If a dog approaches with an owner attached who gleefully tells you that “My dog is okay”, remind this person that this may be true, but that you prefer to introduce slowly if at all. Be assertive. This is your choice and for the benefit of your dog's peace of mind. Tell them that you are in training and PREFER THEY KEEP THEIR DOG AWAY.

If you are bringing your dog to the Vet, Groomer or Massage Therapist for the first, be kind and realistic. If you are a nervous wreck, your dog will sense this. If you are calm, your dog may not like it, but will tolerate it.

Where massage / acupressure / acupuncture are concerned, there is a choice. Most dogs will love it once they realize the benefits. Others may never be relaxed enough to accept this form of therapeutic touch from a stranger. There is no one right or wrong way, only a unique, individual way and dog.

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

Next time you are walking, training, playing - decide that your dog would love dog parks, or the benefits of therapeutic massage or acupuncture, take a deep nose-to-navel breath. Remind yourself about the “talking in my face” scenario. 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 is what we all want, expect, deserve and in a language that we understand. *Enjoy the Journey*