



SPATIAL BUBBLE: We all have them!

By Maureen Ross, MA, NCC, CPDT-KA, February 2011

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.

People and dogs have spatial boundaries. Intrinsically, dogs have extremely sensitive olfactory cells numbering about 75 times greater than ours. Cultural diversification will lend itself to many different greeting rituals. The dog’s greeting ritual is different than ours. It should be respected especially when you are interacting with others whether it is family, friends, strangers on a walk, with veterinary staff, groomer, 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. This is the area in which a dog will decide who and how close another dog (or human) may approach in a particular environment. Previous association when someone encroached upon their “spatial bubble” may have been positive or negative from the dog’s perception, association and feeling.

It is exciting to learn what your dog is saying by observing body language and dogs at play. Jim and Jamie Dutcher’s video, “[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, 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 can be misunderstood or neglected by owners/handlers.*

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. 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.

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:

- 🐾 Train your puppy / dog from the get-go to sit in front of humans.
- 🐾 Socializations and desensitization to sights, sounds, smells should begin safely, slowly, 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!
- 🐾 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 play is over. If they do not come, walk over calmly; take the collar and leash up. You can let them go "free play" 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. 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 can escalate to fights in a nano-second.
- 🐾 *Watch your dog!*

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 and flight kick in at various times. Ask yourself what it would be like to be in an uncomfortable situation. What do you do ... clam up, panic, stop breathing, self-medicate? Dogs go into stress mode too, adrenaline and epinephrine pumping. They react the way dogs do by freezing, retreating, growling or shutting down.

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

*C.L.A.R.I.T.Y.
Compassion, Living and Learning,
Awareness, Relationship, Instinct
and Intuition, Trust and Teach, Yes
to good behavior ...*

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](#).

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 to yourself. Now massage. What feels better? 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, with 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. Escape. It's the best route. Experienced professionals would have an [assess-a-hand](#) available. This is a simple rubber (joke store) hand 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 "her dog is okay", remind this person that this may be true, but that you prefer introduce slowly if at all. Be assertive and tell them that you are in training PREFER THEY KEEP THEIR DOG AWAY. It is a wise choice and your dog-given right.

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.

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 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's what we all want in a language that we understand!

Enjoy the Journey