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He Just Wants To Say "Hi!"

Aggression or appropriate response to rudeness? Far too many dogs suffer because handlers & trainers don't know the difference between the two.

By Suzanne Clothier

Sitting quietly on the mall bench beside my husband, I was minding my own business when the man approached. I glanced up as the man sat next to me. He was a bit close for my comfort, so I edged a little closer to my husband who, busy reading a book, ignored me. Still feeling a bit uncomfortable with the strange man so close, I then turned my head slightly away from him, politely indicating I was not interested in any interaction. To my horror, the man leaned over me and began licking my neck while rudely groping me.

When I screamed and pushed him away, my trouble really began. My husband angrily threw me to the ground, yelling at me "Why did you do that? He was only trying to be friendly and say hi! What a touchy bitch you are! You're going to have to learn to behave better in public."

People all around us stared and shook their heads sadly. I heard a few murmuring that they thought my husband should do something about my behavior; some even mentioned that he shouldn't have such a violent woman out in public until I'd been trained better. As my husband dragged me to the car, I noticed that the man who had groped me had gone a bit further down the mall and was doing the same thing to other women.

This is a silly scenario, isn't it? First, anyone who knows me knows that I would never be in a mall except under considerable duress. More seriously, no rational human being would consider my response to the man's rudeness as inappropriate or vicious. By invading my personal space, the man crossed the lines of decent, civilized behavior; my response would be considered quite justified.

That my husband might punish me for responding to such rudeness by screaming and pushing the offender away is perhaps the most ridiculous aspect of this scenario. If he were to act in this way, there would be no doubt in the minds of even the most casual observers that his ego was of far greater importance than my safety or comfort, and that he was sorely lacking even rudimentary empathy for how I might be feeling in this situation.

Fortunately for me, this scenario is completely imaginary. Unfortunately for many dogs, it is a very real scenario that is repeated far too often. Inevitably, as the owners who have allowed their dogs to act rudely retreat from the situation, there are comments made about "that aggressive dog" (meaning the dog whose space had been invaded) and the classic comment, usually said in hurt tones, "He only wanted to say hi!"

Years ago, a friend of mine in Texas placed a Greyhound with a supposedly knowledgeable person in the Northeast. This person gives seminars all over the world on the care and training of a certain animal, so my friend felt comfortable placing this wonderful hound with her. Less than one week later, my friend received an hysterical call in which the supposed expert was threatening to have this Greyhound put to sleep for being aggressive. Since I was the closest resource, my Texan friend asked me to see what I could do, making it clear that this was one of the best Greyhounds that she had ever rescued - he had demonstrated incredible tolerance for all other dogs and animals.

When I spoke with the new owner, I asked what was going on. Her response was sadly classic: "Well, Champ is quite aggressive. For example, he'll just be laying on the dog bed and my two Golden retrievers come over to say 'hi' and

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then he just attacks them. It's awful!"

My first tip off that the Greyhound was totally blameless was her comment that the Golden Retrievers were just coming over to say "hi." Generally speaking, dogs who live together don't walk over to each other to repeatedly say hello, no more than every time you walk in a room you walk over to a family member and say hello by getting right into their face.

Further questioning revealed that the body posture of the two Golden Retrievers while saying "hi" was very upright, ears forward, tails up and wagging very slowly - a confrontational stance, not a greeting. The Greyhound would often initially turn his head away, but when the two Golden Retrievers began sniffing at him and poking him, he would growl softly. Then, as they persisted, the hound would finally leap up with a roar. Despite her hysterical descriptions of the "fights," I was able to get her to define the amount of damage done by the Greyhound - none.

As we talked on, the picture came in more clearly: the two Golden Retrievers were quite spoiled, pushy with other dogs, and decidedly not happy with this new dog in their household. The woman cheerfully admitted that the two Golden Retrievers were not too well trained and that she sometimes had trouble controlling them around other animals, but "they were so sweet, and there isn't an aggressive bone in their bodies!" she told me.

The Greyhound, on the other hand, she viewed as a fierce, aggressive and dangerous animal who she now had muzzled at all times. I thought for a bit about trying to educate this woman about dog behavior, but decided the kindest thing to do for this hound was to just go and rescue him. So I did, and by the time I'd driven home with this incredible dog, he'd been renamed Beckett and he stayed with me for almost two years until I placed him with a friend who adores him. As for his "aggression," I never saw a hint of it in any situation.

While there are many frustrating aspects of being a dog trainer, one of the most disturbing scenarios is the situation where a dog is acting appropriately but nonetheless is punished (in the name of "training") by humans who do not understand what constitutes normal canine behavior and responses.

Sadly, normal behavior is quickly labeled "problem" behavior, and the dog is now a "problem dog." Depending on the skill and awareness of the trainer or instructor, the dog may be merely puzzled or irritated by well meaning attempts to desensitize or re-condition the behavior or actually punished quite severely using any number of horrific and senseless techniques.

In Beckett's case, a lack of understanding nearly cost him his life. Had I not intervened, his extremely uninformed owner would have had him put to sleep as aggressive. In most cases, the true problem - the rude dog and rude owner who allowed his dog to be rude - is not even noticed or addressed.

This following is an actual e-mail from a concerned owner (reprinted by permission). While I've changed details in order to protect the innocent (the dog!), it is an excellent example of an owner who has tried hard to do well with and for her dog, and of instructors who mean well but fail on a very deep level when it comes to understanding normal canine interactions. (Note: all bold emphasis is mine. Pay attention to these words.)

Dear Suzanne:

You don't know me, but L. is a friend of mine, and she suggested I write to you regarding the strange behavior of my dog. I have a female (spayed) golden retriever, 3 years old, named Cream. Cream comes from good lines (champion show), and is "almost" your typical golden: sweet, goofy, lovable, loves ALL people. Recently, Cream became a certified therapy dog through the Delta Society.

Yet Cream has one problem: she hates young, hyper dogs. If a dog starts jumping all over Cream, Cream gets aggressive - starts to growl, shows some teeth, and if the dog doesn't take the hint after a few seconds, Cream will "attack" the dog. Every time this has happened, it's happened very quickly, and I get Cream off the dog immediately (and "correct" her - laying her down, holding her muzzle, shaking her a bit, saying "NO!" very sternly, etc.). Cream doesn't even like young dogs to lick her - she snaps at them if they do.

Now, Cream only displays this aggressive behavior with young, hyper dogs. Cream has regular dog pals that she plays with almost daily - they wrestle, play bite, and run around together. Some of the dogs she plays with are older, some are the same age, some are even younger, the youngest now being about 9 months old. She plays with both sexes, but she does seem to prefer males. (Cream was spayed at 10 months.)

Cream is in good health. She's on a raw foods diet, had titer testing this year instead of vaccinations, had a full blood panel and thyroid check and both were fine, has been CERFed and her eyes are fine. She does have some mild hip dysplasia, but it doesn't bother her, and she shows no symptoms. She's been very well socialized since she's been a pup, and I bring her everywhere I can (shopping malls, parks, sometimes to campus).

Cream's been through lots of obedience classes, beginning when she was a pup at 4 months old in puppy kindergarten. For the past several months she's been going through a basic obedience class with young dogs - I've been trying to recondition her behavior towards young dogs. I've been food rewarding her when she shows no aggressive behavior to a pup.

It's been going okay, but two weeks ago, a young mastiff puppy got away from her owner, and came charging at Cream. She crashed into Cream (and it was just because she was over excited - she wasn't being aggressive) and Cream came up growling and snarling. Then last weekend, a black lab pup did the same thing, and Cream had the same reaction. Throughout the class, Cream won't even look at the puppies - has her back turned toward them the entire time.

I've got the dog trainers of the class stumped, as they don't really know what to do. Cream's normally such a sweet dog, good with commands, great with people. Cream's also wonderful with children, and has an endless supply of patience with kids - they can pull on her ears, hug her tightly, pull on her tail - and Cream loves it. Cream's fine with dogs who are calm, even friendly towards them, with her tail wagging, and she might even try to get them to play.

Cream has had some bad experiences with dogs. A pit bull jumped out of a car when we were on a walk, and attacked Cream (Cream was about 7 months old). She's had dogs run out of houses and attack her, and dogs who were supposedly tied up, get loose and attack her.

So, do you have any suggestions or theories for us? Well, I'd really appreciate any thoughts you have on our situation.

Lee Anne

Lee Anne tried to be as thorough as possible in presenting Cream's case to me. Her concern was evident, and based on what she presented, she was an owner who spent a lot of time working with and training her dog. From my point of view, the picture she painted was a clear one - Cream was a perfectly normal dog who, from time to time, was forced by rude dogs to draw a line and inform them precisely how rude they had been.

Unfortunately for Cream, her appropriate response to rudeness was misread as aggression, and she was punished. I cannot even begin to fully comprehend the confusion that must flood a dog who has acted appropriately but is punished nonetheless.

If a dog starts jumping all over Cream, Cream gets aggressive - starts to growl, shows some teeth, and if the dog doesn't take the hint after a few seconds, Cream will 'attack' the dog."

There is clear evidence here that Cream never did "suddenly attack" anyone. In a normal progression of warning signs, Cream gave the offending dog a chance to back off. It is only when warning signs were ignored that Cream had to escalate to the threat of violence. That is all her "attacks" on any dog were - threats, not actual attacks with the intent to do harm. Dog who mean to do harm do so with breathtaking speed, and intervention is generally not possible. Though noisy and scary, most "fights" are a series of threats with fully inhibited biting employed by the combatants.

When I had a phone consultation with Lee Anne, one of my first questions was about Cream's "attacks" on other dogs. I wanted to know how much damage she did to the other dog during these "attacks." In his lectures on aggression, Dr. Ian Dunbar urges trainers to always look at what he calls the Fight-Bite Ratio: how many altercations has your dog been involved in, and how many times has another dog been seriously hurt by your dog?

He is careful to define "seriously hurt" as needing veterinary attention. An accidental puncture or two on the muzzle, head or ear is not a serious injury, merely a by-product of powerful teeth flashing at speed as the dog tries to make his point in a very noisy, dramatic way. The majority of dog-to-dog altercations do not result in serious injury, though they are extremely frightening to witness. Even if the number of fights is quite high, if the number of bites inflicted in those fights is low or zero, then you know that the dog inhibiting his bite - a good sign even though there may be problems that cause the fights and which need resolution.

For all of Cream's "attacks" on other dogs, there had only been one small puncture inflicted on the head, a typical site for an accidental, unintended punch of a tooth. As I suspected from her owner's description, Cream had been well socialized with both people and other dogs and had learned to inhibit her bite; thus, her "attacks" - while alarming to all involved - did not result in any damage to the offending dog.

". . . two weeks ago, a young mastiff puppy got away from her owner, and came charging at Cream. She crashed into Cream (and it was just because she was over excited - she wasn't being aggressive) and Cream came up growling and snarling. Then last weekend, a black lab pup did the same thing, and Cream had the same reaction."

Hidden in this section of Lee Anne's letter is an important notion: that puppies aren't acting rudely, they're just "over-excited." It never fails to amaze me how willing humans are to excuse and rationalize a dog's rude behavior instead of teaching them good manners. Part of developing appropriate social behavior is learning that no matter how excited you may be, there are other folks in the world and certain basic rules of politeness still apply no matter how excited you may be.

During an off-lead play session at our camp, two adolescent dogs began to roughhouse at top speed, resulting in one of them crashing hard into an older dog who'd been minding his own business. With a loud roar, he chased the offender for a few steps to make his point: "Watch where the heck you're going!"

A few minutes later, with the game still going strong, we watched as that same youngster found himself headed once again on a collision course with the older dog. It seemed another crash and altercation were inevitable. To the surprise of many who were watching, the youngster used all of his skills to avoid the crash, neatly swerving past the older dog who made no comment. The puppy had learned that no matter how excited he might be by the game, he still had an obligation to be polite.

We would look with a raised eyebrow at a mother who allowed a child to simply carom around a room bouncing off people and did nothing to calm the child, and who told those her child had shoved and pushed that, "He's just over excited." Just as parents bear some responsibility for their children's actions, dog owners have a responsibility to help their puppies act in an appropriate way - not to excuse rudeness.

Sometimes, this requires that we not allow a young dog (or a dog of any age) to escalate to such a high level of excitement and arousal. As a rule of thumb, the more excited and emotional a dog becomes, the less capable they are of thinking clearly and acting appropriately. (This is also true of all other animals, including people.) Wise handlers know that when emotions are running high, a cool down period is a good choice to avoid problems. Sometimes, helping a young dog learn what is appropriate requires the assistance of a normal, well socialized dog who can make his or her point without leaving anything but a clear message imprinted upon the puppy.

Normal dogs, like normal people, are often incredibly tolerant of the antics of youngsters. The tolerance level is highly individual and dependent upon the dog's experience with puppies. Dogs without much experience with puppies may not be nearly as tolerant as dogs who have seen a lot of puppies come and go.

Tolerance levels are also highly dependent upon the youngster's age; there are different expectations for what constitutes appropriate behavior at any given age. What we might find acceptable behavior in a 3 year old child would be frowned upon in an 8 year old. Dogs also have a timetable in their heads - puppies under 16 weeks of age can usually take appalling liberties with an adult dog. As Dunbar notes, there appears to be a "puppy license" of sorts, possession of which entitles you to be an utter pest without much repercussion. Past the age of 4 months, the "puppy license" expires as hormone levels shift and psychological changes occur. At this point, adult dogs begin to gradually insist on more controlled, respectful interactions from youngsters.

"I've got the dog trainers of the class stumped, as they don't really know what to do. Cream's normally such a sweet dog, good with commands, great with people. Cream's also wonderful with children, and has an endless supply of patience with kids - they can pull on her ears, hug her tightly, pull on her tail - and Cream loves it. Cream's fine with dogs who are calm, even friendly towards them, with her tail wagging, and she might even try to get them to play."

Let's change this a little to read:

"Margaret is fine with people who are calm and well behaved, and interacts with them appropriately. She's also endlessly patient with and kind to children, even bratty ones. But when loud, obnoxious teenagers begin shoving her around, she's really weird - she starts telling them to leave her alone. What can we do with Margaret? Her behavior has us stumped."

Make any sense? Of course not. One of the most incredible aspects of the Cream consultation was the complete focus on Cream as the problem. Not once had the owner or instructors looked past Cream herself to find the source of her problem, although they had at least recognized "hyper, young dogs" as the trigger. While they were perfectly willing to excuse the inappropriate behavior of the rude dogs, they were also willing to classify appropriate behavior as a problem.

I found it very depressing that Lee Anne, in posting a request for help on a Golden Retriever e-mail list, got this

response consistently from the many "experts" on-line: "This is not normal Golden behavior. This is a serious problem."

As if being a Golden, or any other breed, somehow removes portions of the normal canine behavioral repertoire! No matter what the breed, no matter how much genetic manipulation may have muted or inhibited certain behaviors, a dog is a dog is a dog. And the basics of dog-to-dog communications remain the same: a growl means back off in any breed's language, a tail held high and stiffly is a warning, rolling over on your back is an apology, etc.

Cream was not acting aggressively; she was displaying normal canine behavior in response to considerable rudeness. She had never so much as uttered a sound toward rude dogs until they invaded her space and made contact with her. And even the most angelic of Golden retrievers are quite capable of growls, snarls, snaps, bites and other communications in the face of such rudeness.

My experience has been that it is owners of breeds considered non-aggressive that cause the most problems in dog-to-dog interactions simply by being unaware that their dog is rude. To the owners of non-aggressive breeds, there doesn't appear to be any thought that rudeness can take many forms. Anyone can recognize that a dog lunging and snarling is being rude. Far too few folks recognize that simply getting into another's dog space - however sweetly and quietly - is just as rude in the world of dogs. Owners of rude dogs do not perceive their dogs' actions as rude; they see only "friendliness," as if the behavior for greeting people is the same as greeting another dog - it's not! Thus the classic line, "He's only trying to say 'hi!'"

A good friend of mine was a case in point. Her Sheltie was a quiet, retiring little fellow who had never displayed any aggressive behavior towards another living being. Yet repeatedly, this dog triggered impressive displays from other dogs, usually those of the German persuasion, when he wandered into their space. Inevitably, my friend would be horrified by "those aggressive dogs" and retreat with her Sheltie, never suspecting that she and her dog were the problem.

Though charming and sweet, her Sheltie was extremely rude and invasive; the responses he got from other dogs were largely quite well deserved, though inevitably the Germans were blamed. In each and every class this woman attended with her Sheltie, owners of dogs who did not tolerate such rudeness had to watch her and her dog constantly. And in each and every class, she was completely unaware how many potential problems had been averted by alert handlers who simply moved their dogs out of her dog's rudeness zone.

There were three basic factors at work: the Sheltie's lack of dog/dog socialization which resulted in his being completely ignorant about what constituted polite behavior toward other dogs; my friend's misconception that her "friendly, non-aggressive" dog could never precipitate a problem; and her giving her dog the freedom to invade the space of other dogs without any thought or understanding of how that might be perceived by the dogs who were minding their own business.

She became a much sadder and wiser handler the day she unthinkingly walked her Sheltie into my pack of German Shepherds who were playing happily in their own yard. She made a few seriously bad assumptions.

First, she assumed that because they were my dogs, these six German Shepherds were somehow exempt from the nasty realities of pack behavior. No matter how well trained or socialized an individual dog may be, when that individual becomes a member of a pack (and six is decidedly a pack), the rules change considerably. Pack behavior is complex, often unpleasant but a very real part of dog behavior.

Her second assumption was that because each of my dogs had met her dog in the house on an individual basis, they would be fine with him as a group out in the yard. In the house under my supervision is a very different scenario than playing in the yard without my supervision.

Her third assumption was that somehow her dog would be able to cope with a group situation when he'd consistently had problems dealing with my Shepherds one on one.

My dogs, very revved up since they'd been in the house for hours and now playing hard, were surprised to see her and her dog come up from the direction of the barn - they'd last seen her and her dog in the house. They charged at her, and instead of laying down and crying "uncle" which was the correct response, the Sheltie tried to run, found himself at the end of the lead and accidentally pulled up into a very upright position (read "challenging posture" in dog language).

I can only guess, but knowing my dogs, I believe that his lack of normal behavior coupled with his previous displays of rudeness made this unintentional challenge the last straw. Fortunately for all involved, my dogs had no intention of hurting him - just teaching him some basic manners. He walked away from it all with only one

small wound (later made much worse when he ripped his stitches out!). His owner was bitten when she made her final bad decision for that day - she instinctively reached into the swirling pack to rescue her dog and was bitten on the hand.

She learned a lot about dog behavior that day. Although I'd have preferred some other way to educate her about what constitutes rude behavior, she was finally open to hearing how rude she had allowed her dog to be. It was a complete shock to her. She viewed her dog as a completely non-aggressive animal. Every time she had heard me speak about dog-to-dog rudeness, she had assumed that only aggressive, boisterous, loud dogs were rude. She became a much more aware and careful handler only after my pack drilled home the lesson.

Just as my friend unrealistically expected my dogs to be exempt from the ugly realities of pack behavior, Cream's owner and her instructors were unrealistically holding Cream to higher standard of tolerance than they would expect from themselves. After all, she is a Golden. Does that mean she or any other typically low-aggression breed should tolerate rude dogs making physical contact?

Like people, dogs have varying thresholds for what I call the "fool factor." Consider yourself in this situation: you are walking down the street, and a group of loud, noisy teenagers - busy at the center of their own world - bumps into you and knocks you down. Do you smile at them? Do you mutter, "Watch where you're going!" as you brush yourself off? Do you get quite vocal in expressing your displeasure?

All depends on your tolerance threshold. It also depends on your mood, your health, the various stresses at work in your life, etc. Imagine that you had just won the lottery moments before they bumped into you. Chances are pretty good you'd be far more tolerant than if you'd just come from a meeting with the IRS. What if you'd been mugged a year earlier by a similar group of young hooligans? Chances are good that you might view this group as potentially dangerous, again altering your possible response to their rudeness.

Our dogs are no different. Each dog - no matter what the breed - has his own tolerance threshold, and that threshold is variable as a result of many factors, including basic breed characteristics. Some breeds have been selectively bred to have a very high tolerance threshold because they are asked to work in large groups. Fox hounds come to mind as a breed specifically selected for tolerance of other dogs. Generally speaking, the guardian breeds by their very nature and job descriptions are not meant to work in groups and have a stronger sense of personal space, thus are usually much less tolerant of rudeness.

Bad experiences, such as Cream had on several occasions when she was attacked by other dogs, can make a dog quite sensitive to rude behavior by other dogs. From the dog's point of view, there is the very real possibility that such rudeness could become an actual attack - it has in the past. Health problems can also affect a dog's tolerance level. A dog who is in pain (whether just muscle sore from hard work or play, or from a disease such as hip dysplasia or the creeping onset of arthritis) will have far less tolerance than he might when he's feeling fine.

We cannot expect our dogs to be saints - at least not until we can rise to that level of tolerance ourselves. And that's unlikely to happen any time soon. We can expect our dogs to be tolerant to the degree that we educate them, socialize them and protect them - with respect to their individual needs and boundaries.

In my opinion, Cream has actually tried hard to achieve sainthood. As Lee Anne notes, if put in a setting with puppies, Cream's response is to turn her back to them. I don't know how much more you can ask for from a dog, especially one who's been punished for saying what needs to be said to rude youngsters.

If Cream were a dog with a very short fuse and a very low "fool factor" threshold, I'd feel obligated to help her find coping skills to lengthen that fuse - if only to lower the stress in her life. Fuse lengthening is especially important if you are going to ask the dog to cope with the situations that typically arise in class and dog event settings. But where I find "short fuses," I usually find other contributing factors. So, I'd take a very hard look at the relationship between dog and handler (particularly in the areas of leadership and boundaries), the dog's degree of self control and socialization with other dogs.

Talking over Cream's story with fellow trainers I respect, one question kept popping up: "Why were these dogs allowed to jump all over Cream in the first place?"

It is an important question. To my way of thinking, a critical part of the relationships I have with my animals is this promise: "I will protect you." And to the best of my abilities, I do not violate this promise in any way.

A few years ago, I was invited to be part of a fund-raising dog walk. One of my duties was to lead the entire group on the first lap of the walk. I had chosen my oldest bitch, Vali, to accompany me. As we waited, hundreds of dogs and handlers assembled in the park. Many of the dogs were quite excited. Some dogs were only under borderline

control. Vali laid quietly at my side, watching it all with great tolerance.

One particular dog caught my eye - a huge yellow Labrador who was dragging a small child behind him as he plowed through the crowd. I watched as this dog marked not only every tree or bush he passed, but also several pants legs of unsuspecting people. More aware handlers quietly gathered up their dogs and moved out of Mr. Rude's path, thus avoiding potential altercations.

As he moved closer to us, I saw Vali's head turn toward him and become quite still. Her eyes began to harden as she assessed - quite accurately - just how rude a dog this was. I could see her contemplating possible responses should the Lab be so rude as to invade her space (which in such public settings is perhaps 2-3 feet from her body). The only intervention necessary was to gently touch her on the head and say, "Yes. I see him. And you're right - he is rude. I'll handle it." Then I stepped slightly in front of her so that if he approached, he would have to first come through me. Immediately, Vali relaxed and went back to watching the crowd in general though she did keep an eye on Mr. Rude. Fortunately for us, Mr. Rude veered off to hassle another dog and the moment passed.

There were other ways I could have responded. I could have seen Vali's very appropriate response as potential aggression, and told her harshly, "Leave it!" To my way of thinking, that does not acknowledge or respect her feelings; it merely demonstrates my own fears about losing control of my dog's behavior.

I could have ignored the subtle signs that she had some concerns about Mr. Rude, and waited until he invaded her space then punished her for defending herself against rudeness. To my way of thinking, that would violate my promise to protect those I love, and then add insult to injury by punishing her for protecting herself. Keeping that promise to my dogs means that I am obligated to watch for any sign that they are beginning to feel concerned about a situation, and to act quickly to eliminate or minimize their concerns.

Unfortunately for many dogs labeled "dog aggressive," a weird loop begins to form between dog and handler in the struggle to deal with this behavior. Understandably shocked when their dog exhibits any kind of aggressive behavior, the handler begins to scan the world at large for anything that might trigger that behavior again. They become hyper-alert to any potential situation, and upon sighting a potential problem, grab the lead with a death grip in order to control their "aggressive dog."

Their own concern coupled with the death grip escalates the dog's anxiety and aggression, usually resulting in precisely the behavior they sought to avoid in the first place. Far more insidious, however, is the message sent to the dog whose handler pays intense attention to the world at large but none to the dog himself!

In one of my seminars, a woman presented her terrier Brisky with the complaint that he was "dog aggressive." In reality, Brisky had very little off-lead socialization, was quite fearful of other dogs, and all his "aggression" was nothing more than defensive offense. If given a choice, Brisky would have happily left the room and driven himself home.

The woman looked like a Secret Service agent on presidential detail - she never stopped scanning the room for any potential problem. Was that person going to get up and walk their dog past Brisky? Was that dog going to turn around and lie down facing Brisky? She saw potential disaster in every slight adjustment or movement of another dog. What she never looked at was Brisky himself. Consequently, his "sudden" explosions always came as a shock to her.

I felt very sorry for Brisky. He sent many signals to his owner that he was worried and afraid. But all his communications were all ignored until he felt so pressured that he had to protect himself in the only way he knew how. It is very hard to feel safe and protected if the person you are with pays no attention to you.

Consider this scenario: A mother and child are walking in a crowded mall. The mother is hyper alert to the crowd, and vigilantly checks for potential dangers to her child. The child sees a woman who looks just like the bad witch in a favorite book. Fearful, the child reaches for her mother's hand, but the mother is so busy scanning the crowd that she ignores the child. As the "bad witch woman" gets closer, the child grabs her mother urgently. But her mother doesn't respond. The traffic flow of the crowd forces the "bad witch woman" to pass right next to the child who, now completely terrified, screams loudly. The mother, shocked by her child's seemingly inexplicable behavior, asks angrily, "What is the matter with you?"

What if, when the child anxiously reached for the mother's hand, she had received a reassuring squeeze and a smile as her mother looked down to check on her? What if the mother had seen the signs of concern on her daughter's face and stopped to ask, "What's wrong?" and then seeing the problem, moved so that she was between the "bad witch woman" and the child as they had to pass.

In which child do you think the anxiety level will be higher - the child whose mother ignores her until she screams in terror, or the child whose mother pays attention? Trust within a relationship is built on the belief that our behavior will be noticed and responded to, if not necessarily always fully understood. In my experience, dogs whose owners recognize, acknowledge and act on early signs of discomfort have deep trust in their owners' ability to protect them in almost any situation.

When working with people like Brisky's owner, my goal is to get them to watch the dog, not the world at large. If their attention is outward, instead of on the dog, they will miss the early signs that their dog is feeling uncomfortable and needs some help. The earlier the dog receives acknowledgment for what he's feeling, is helped to cope with the situation, and given evidence that you understand his concern and will deal with it on his behalf, the less likely his behavior is to escalate into dramatic displays. This is true whether it's a dog like Vali who believes that a rude dog should be taken down a peg or a dog like Brisky who is afraid.

I encourage handlers to be quite active in protecting their dog - whether that means quietly walking away to a safer area, or, when that's not possible, literally stepping in physically to present the first line of defense. Stepping in between two dogs is a classic act of leadership. Dogs do it with other dogs all the time, so this same gesture coming from a human leader is understood and appreciated.

Brisky visibly relaxed when his owner began watching him, not the world; by the end of the day, he was far more tolerant of situations that had previously triggered his explosions. No doubt he felt safer - someone was finally listening to what he had to say, and offering him help (such as changing his body posture and thus his emotional state) when he needed it.

The owner reported that she felt calmer knowing that Brisky would let her know how he was feeling, and that she could help him before he felt the need to protect himself. Instead of having to scan the world at large constantly, she could relax and focus only on what Brisky told her about the world as he saw it.

Cream's owner would not have let a rude child bang Cream on the head or hit her with a stick; she would not have allowed cruel strangers to walk up and kick Cream. No caring owner would ever let another human being do anything to their dog that would create a need for that dog to protect herself. (I am not going to discuss the horrors inflicted in the name of training, and the psychology of why owners willing allow their dogs to be subject to these horrors.)

Yet, just like many otherwise loving dog owners, Lee Anne had done nothing to protect her dog from other rude dogs. A hefty portion of responsibility for failing to protect Cream needs to fall on the instructors. Lee Anne, quite reasonably, looked to the instructors for guidance. If they did not intervene when a dog acted rudely toward Cream, how would Lee Anne know that she should? If they defined Cream's behavior as a problem, then Lee Anne - although upset and unable to make sense of such a diagnosis - also began to see a problem. Fortunately for Cream, Lee Anne kept widening her search as she sought help and advice for her dog. Not all owners work so hard to find an answer that satisfies the unpleasant niggling in the heart that says, "Something is not right here."

In my opinion, an instructor's responsibility is not only to educate dogs and owners, but also to act to protect each dog from the other members of the class. This requires an ever-deepening understanding of canine behavior, and an attendance to subtleties of behavior that foretell problems brewing.

During our consultation, Lee Anne asked the question that inevitably arises, "But how do I stop dogs from being rude?"

There is no easy answer to that question. Certainly, no matter how aware or dedicated a handler, it is not possible to stop other dogs from being rude - or, more to the point, it is not possible to educate all other handlers so that they won't allow their dogs to be rude. I believe fools and rudeness are widespread, and to the best of my knowledge, there's no concerted government program to eradicate either rudeness or foolishness. (If there were, Capitol Hill would soon be a ghost town. . .)

Here's my advice for dealing with the "fool factor."

1. Socialize your dog thoroughly with other dogs; for puppies, choose playmates of a similar age and adults who have been well socialized themselves. This means off-lead socialization, not sniffing noses at the end of the lead. The more experience a dog has with other dogs, the more refined his judgment will become about what constitutes rude or foolish behavior and how best to deal with it. He'll also learn how to be a polite dog himself.

If a dog has not or cannot be well socialized, be realistic about what you can expect from him in his dealings with other dogs. This may mean altering your training or competition goals to be fair to a dog who may not be able to

cope with the stresses of these situations.

2. When socializing your dog under someone else's instruction or guidance, be careful. Some instructors and trainers are appalling ignorant about basic behavior, and unable to set up a positive socialization situation. If you feel uncomfortable with a situation, remove your dog. It only takes a few seconds for a bad experience to leave a lasting impression, particularly on a young dog.

Just turning dogs loose together to play is not socialization. There has to be supervision, and intervention when the potential for a problem appears. The instructor must pay attention to each individual dog as well as the pairings or subsets within the whole play group. If one dog is getting overly excited, it's time to gently capture him, take him out of the play group and calm him down before letting him play again. If a fearful dog has reached his limit, it's time to remove him from the group and give him time to relax and build his courage before putting him back in. If a particular dog or dogs begins to gang up on another dog, time to break up the brat pack.

Instructors need to carefully assess groups and not pair dogs inappropriately. For example, a rambunctious Labrador puppy should not be paired with a timid Sheltie pup. Since Lab puppies often resemble a cannonball crossed with a Sumo wrestler on drugs and consequently like heavy duty physical contact (preferably in mid-air, at great speed), the more sensitive Sheltie may be quickly overwhelmed and quite possibly hurt by the Lab pup. Not only might this leave a very bad impression on the Sheltie but it can also teach the Lab puppy that rudeness is acceptable.

3. Watch your dog. Your dog will tell you all you need to know about his perception of the world. When you're with him, really be with him. Pay attention to his behavior. Position yourself and/or the dog so that the dog is always in your peripheral vision. Practice checking on your dog often. If he appears to be concerned, find out why. And then help him. Protect him.

Teach yourself to recognize the small, subtle signs that he's shifted out of a perfectly relaxed state of mind. These may be as simple as the tilt of an ear, a raised eyebrow, a slight holding of the breath or tensing of the muscles. Each dog is different - learn to read your own dog.

If you can't watch your dog in a situation where there are potential problems, put him somewhere safe. I've seen far too many incidents occur unnecessarily because a handler was engrossed in a conversation or fascinated by what was happening in the ring and ignoring the dog at their side.

When a handler's attention is elsewhere, I call this handling by Braille - meaning, knowing nothing more than that there was still pressure on the lead and thus the dog was still present. Unbeknownst to you, the dog could be acting rudely himself or trying to avoid a rude dog. Handle your dog with awareness, not by the length of your lead.

4. Be pro-active in protecting your dog. If you see a fool and his rude dog headed your way, do your best to protect your dog. If possible, walk away, lightly and quietly asking your dog to come with you. Be sure you are breathing and relaxed - don't let your apprehension about a possible altercation impact negatively on your dog.

If you can't walk away, try to get the fool to stop. Position yourself between the fool and your dog. If necessary, loudly & firmly tell the approaching person that your dog is not good with other dogs.

In close quarters where there really aren't any options for moving away, shield your dog with your own body. (Remember, stepping between dogs is an act of protective leadership.)

If you need to, sharply tell the fool to "please control your rude dog." You'll probably get a dirty look (fools rarely believe they or their dogs are rude and are shocked when spoken to sharply) but chances are good they'll at least make a show at controlling their dog or move huffily away from you.

DON'Ts & DON'Ts

DON'T bring an intolerant or undersocialized dog to a puppy kindergarten or other concentrations of rudeness & stupidity when you know he can't handle puppies, stupidity, or rudeness!

DON'T put your dog in a situation you or he are not prepared to handle.

DON'T turn a rude puppy or dog loose with an intolerant adult.

DON'T expect your dog to like every dog he meets (at least until you like every person you meet.)

DON'T allow your dog to become overexcited or rude - help him find a more appropriate behavior or remove him briefly from the triggering situation

DON'T allow other people to allow their dogs to be rude to your dog.

DON'T ignore your dog or what your dog tells you about his feelings.
DON'T punish a dog for telling another dog to get the hell out of his face.
DON'T punish an adult for reminding a puppy to mind his manners.
DON'T let your training or competition goals overwhelm your good sense - always be fair to your dog.

DO respect the fact that your dog has a need for & a right to his personal space.
DO socialize your dog so that he's wise in the ways of other dogs.
DO accept the inexplicable disliking that your dog may have for another dog.
DO build your dog's tolerance levels through repeated, positive experiences.
DO continually educate yourself regarding normal and appropriate canine behavior in any given situation.
DO plan ahead to how you will handle difficult situations, people or dogs.
DO earn your dog's trust by keeping your promise to protect him.
DO pay attention to your dog when you are with him.
DO insist that your dog behave politely.
DO respect that your dog's individual needs may or may not be in line with your training or competition goals.
DO put your dog first - all your hopes, dreams, titles & goals all mean nothing if you ignore the needs, fears and realities of who your dog is.
DO honor & respect your dog's concerns, whether or not you share them. (Remember how your mom left the light in the hall on at night when you were a kid? It probably wasn't because she was afraid of the dark.)

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