



## DOG ETIQUETTE Helping Your Dog Have Better Social Skills!

By Heather Bruce

Having been around Agility for 10+ years and having been owned by Border Collies for almost 20, we have come to the conclusion that it is VERY common for this breed to have “space issues”. However, other breeds/mixes may exhibit the same sort of behaviors. The behavior I refer to is lunging, snarling and/or barking at other dogs. Because it is more common for some breeds than others does not excuse the behavior, but it may help to explain it. Border Collies like to be in control (of the herd) and they may use some of the same maneuvers they might use on livestock to move them...particularly when giving the other dog “the Border Collie eye” doesn’t work. However, letting the dog behave this way is irresponsible and potentially dangerous.

There is a huge difference between a dog that guards its immediate space (or handler’s space) and the dog that actually goes out of its way to attack another dog. I recently witnessed a large dog appear as if he was going to attack another dog by lunging, snarling and barking at the end of his leash. It really was scary to see, even if you know the dog (which I do). At the time, I thought, “I sure hope that leash doesn’t break!” However, once the object of his attention was out of immediate sight the behavior immediately quit. There was no contact made whatsoever, but it was un-nerving to bystanders, even though the dog did not do anything physically to any dog.

I was reminded of something we had to do years ago. When our instructor threatened to throw us out of Sadie’s very first class because she was making SURE no dogs came within 6 feet of “Dad”, we were understandably devastated. We had looked forward to taking this class for months. She was used to being with other dogs...what could go wrong? I’ll tell you: she looked VICIOUS and insane! We have it on video and use it show people how behavior can be changed with the right help! Our Agility career almost ended right there. Fortunately, we knew Sharon Olsen, then local 4H Dog Program Leader. She recommended Nancy Baer, co-author of the book, Leader of the Pack and owner of A Canine Experience.

Nancy told us in that the behavior we were seeing was “normal” behavior for a dog that was protecting her Dad from what she perceived as other dogs out of control and “particularly because she is a Border Collie, a breed that sees **everything**!” Sadie’s behavior gave the term “hyper-vigilant” new meaning. We were told that we could help change the behavior considerably, but that Sadie would probably never be totally at ease with other dogs poking their noses around her. Nancy taught us that we were giving her the wrong cues (and keeping the leash taut was not the solution and even made it worse!) We became alarmed and fearful when we were in with other dogs, she felt it through the leash and responded by lunging out to protect us. After all, from her standpoint, we were nervous and tense, so there must be a reason. Sadie thought she was just the gal to fix this!

After working with Nancy (two sessions), we were able to attend the next Agility class and continue on to Agility success. At age 11 she is quite appropriate with other dogs and we totally trust her to respond to them correctly! Even though she is quite capable of being around ringside now without incident, she still does not like other dogs “getting in

her face” (or any other part of her anatomy...ahem) however, she deals with them in a considerably calmer manner.: a lifted lip, the occasional air snap. It is dog talk for “stay back.”

Xena had “issues” as well and Nancy helped again. Xena is MUCH improved, but she will never be completely relaxed to have other dogs sniff her just anywhere....if you know what I mean! She will still growl, but as I tell people, it is appropriate for her to do that if the other dog is getting in her literal space. We now have a new pup, Bandit, who is still learning his social ropes. Therefore, he has been corrected by our dogs and other dogs when he gets too “in your face” (or the other end for that matter). People will often say, “Oh stop that!” to their dog, but we will tell them that in this case, their dog’s growling or lifting of lip as a warning is completely appropriate. And now Bandit reads those behaviors very well...most of the time.

In the process of researching dog behavior, we discovered that there are dogs that “fire off” and those that appear to be “innocent” in the interaction, but may be causing the other dog to “fire off.” These dogs are in fact showing rude, intrusive behavior, such as starring, glaring, trying to show dominant behavior by placing their head over the other dogs shoulders or head, pushing into their space and more. These behaviors can actually cause a dog to display “boundary setting” behaviors, which may include growling, lifted lips and even the occasional “air bite”. Often, the dog that does the growl, snap, air biting behavior gets blamed and the “rude” dog does not. This is where the responsibility of the handler comes in! Not only is the person with the loud dog, aggressive dog or air-biting dog responsible for monitoring and possibly correcting their dog’s behavior, but the owner of the dog that is “just trying to say Hi!” needs to help their dog NOT do the rude behaviors. There is a very good Suzanne Clothier article on her website called “He Just Wants to Say Hi!”: <http://www.flyingdogpress.com/articles.html> It is well worth reading!

If you have a dog that shows any of these issues, by all means, **call for help! Do it as soon as you see there is a problem that you can’t solve. The longer you allow the behavior to continue, the worse it will become and the harder it is to reform.** Remember, too, that a dog that acts aggressively even if it doesn’t make contact, may scar another dog’s psyche, particularly if they are young!

Responsible partnership with your dog means you become aware of what signals are normal between dogs and what constitute possible problems. You need to learn to diffuse tense situations in a positive and firm way. If your dog tends to get nervous in a crowded environment, then only expose your dog to this situation a couple of minutes at a time and as your dog relaxes, increase the time. Sadie and Xena can now be trusted to be in the ring area without incident, but I can tell you that was a time when it was nerve wracking to take them out. Patience and a firm attitude...the same qualities that make a good parent, make you a good “parent” (read that: Pack Leader) for your dog!

