

# What We Can Learn From European Dog Culture

The very first time I went to Europe (way back in 1977), I was immediately struck by the fact that there were dogs in restaurants, dogs riding the trains, dogs in all kinds of places they were never allowed in America. This article offers some interesting suggestions on the differences that may account for this. Some of her suggestions may feel antithetical to our own customs and habits, especially for those of us with therapy dogs, who are used to welcoming strangers and all manner of interactions. Still, ideas worth contemplating. (-KK)

• *By Sassafras Lowrey*

When I went to Europe, people asked: “Is something wrong with American dogs?” The answer has more to do with us than our pets.

When I traveled in Europe, specifically England, Germany, France and the Netherlands, I noticed an intense difference in the way dogs were treated and integrated into society compared to the United States. Quite

simply, dogs were everywhere: restaurants and buses and performance venues and countless other places.

Obviously not the case in the United States, and it got me wondering why European dogs and American dogs behave so differently. In Europe dogs tend to be welcome in most public spaces and they are calm, relaxed and quiet there. In the United States, however, pet dogs aren't welcome in most public spaces, and often struggle in the public places where they

are allowed. Dogs are dogs no matter where they are born, and the differences in behavior often come down to an individual dog's temperament as well as socialization and training

received as a puppy.

But dog behavior isn't all about the dogs. A lot of it has to do with us. As big as the differences might be between the behavior of American dogs and European dogs, there are even bigger differences in

how Americans relate to dogs we encounter in public. Our behavior has a lot to do with why our dogs might have more behavioral challenges, and the good news is there's something we can do about it.

## Give dogs some space

One small thing that we can do that will have a big impact on our dogs is to admire them from

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Dining with their dog in Paris. Credit Peter Turnley, Getty Images



## European Dog Culture (Cont.)

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a distance instead of getting in their face.

Kama Brown, a professional dog trainer, said that “in America, we tend to comment on each other’s dogs, we tend to interact with each other’s dogs.” But, she said, “In Europe they don’t tend to do that as much.” This sounds simple, but it can have a profound impact on the way dogs move through space. Ms. Brown notes that in Europe, “a person walking with a dog is not seen as an invitation to socialize. Whereas in America, moving across the street to avoid another owner and dog, or not allowing dogs to interact who are passing each other on a walk, can be seen as antisocial.”

The problem then is that in order to appease strangers and be seen as neighborly, people routinely put their dogs into stressful social situations that can lead to rehearsing fearful or anxious behavior (or even dog bites.) Your dog might like you and your family, might even like your friends, but that doesn’t mean he or she wants every stranger to run up and give a hug.

It’s easy to see why people are drawn to cute dogs, but one of the most important things American dog guardians can do is be advocates for their dogs, telling strangers “no” when they ask to pet their dog and being thoughtful about busy public places.

### Set proper boundaries

When people think about boundaries and dog training, they generally assume we’re talking about the dog — but most of the time, the main problem is people.

To set up our dogs to succeed, we need to not

put them in uncomfortable situations, whether out in the world or at home with guests and family. Zazie Todd, a professional dog trainer and author of the forthcoming book “Wag: The Science of Making Your Dog Happy,” said that “people tend to assume that dogs are sociable and friendly, and don’t necessarily consider if a dog wants affection from them at a particular moment in time. This is especially an issue with children.”

Children are particularly susceptible to being bitten by dogs, but not just by strange dogs. Many children are bitten by dogs that they know and that are in the home. This has less to do with the dog and more to do with the child. Educating family and friends of all ages about when it is and isn’t OK to engage your dog makes sure everyone stays and feels safe, including your dog.

Dr. Todd said, “It’s important to know that if a dog is resting (sitting or lying down), a child should not approach them as this is a common scenario for young children to be bitten; instead we should teach them to call the dog to them, and supervise carefully while they pat the dog.”

### Embrace positive training methods

The way we teach our dogs has a substantial impact on their quality of life and adaptability to new situations. Unfortunately, dog training in the United States is not a regulated industry. Anyone can call themselves dog trainers and start charging people without any qualifications or breadth of experience, using any methodology they choose, regardless of if it’s based in science or not.

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## European Dog Culture (Cont.)

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Dog training takes time, and dogs learn best when we use positive reward-based training methods that gently help and encourage dogs by rewarding good behavior. “Studies have found that using aversive methods — like leash jerks or electronic collars — has risks for dogs, including the risk of fear, anxiety, and aggression,” Dr. Todd said. “Positive reinforcement avoids those risks and it works really well.”

People desperate for a quick fix to behavioral issues with their dogs are particularly susceptible to empty promises from unqualified trainers, or trainers who use pain and coercion-based methods.

“Unfortunately, we know that many dog owners use a mix of methods, and dog training is not regulated, so it’s important for dog owners to learn more about how to train dogs.” Dr. Todd said.

For example, shock collars, sometimes called e-collars or electronic collars, are banned in the United Kingdom, but they are legal in the United States. If you are hiring a dog trainer, be sure to ask questions not only about the trainer’s experience but also his or her qualifications and approach to training.

Do not be afraid to ask if trainers use only positive reinforcement-based training methods.

You want to find a trainer who rewards dogs with treats and toys as they learn and avoids punishing behaviors or using pain-based techniques (such as prong collars, shock collars or physical intimidation).

Similarly, you want to avoid any trainer who talks about “dominance,” “alpha” or “pack” training because we now know that dogs are not actually small wolves. This kind of aggressive training will only exacerbate any behavioral challenges you see.

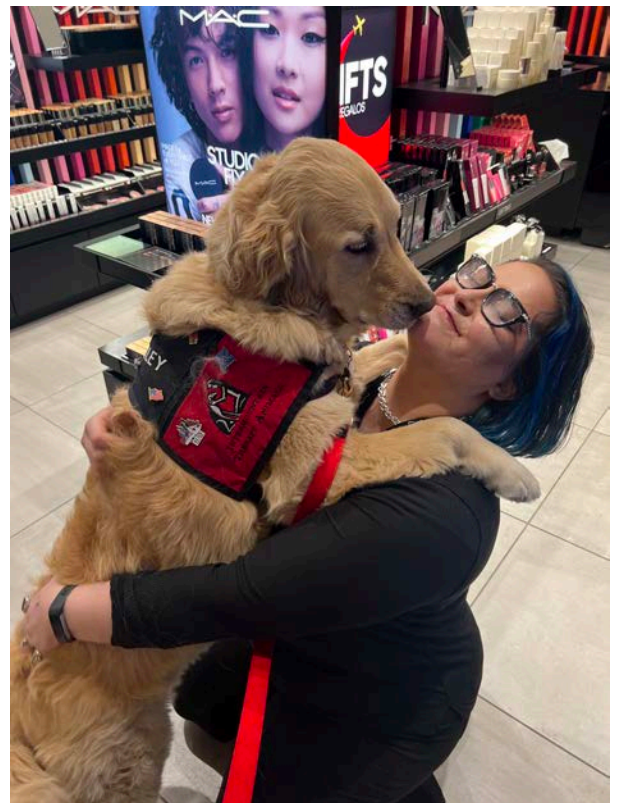
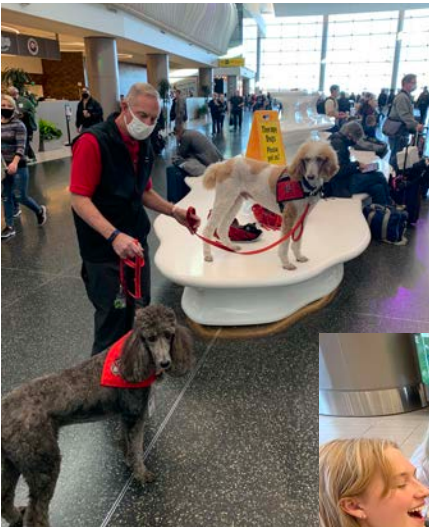
No matter where we live, we can all be a little more thoughtful about how we engage with the pups we encounter. Ask before greeting and just generally give them space instead of assuming that all dogs want to or will be comfortable interacting with strangers.

If you have a dog, you can help your pup out by being its advocate and reminding people you encounter your dog isn’t a walking stuffed animal.

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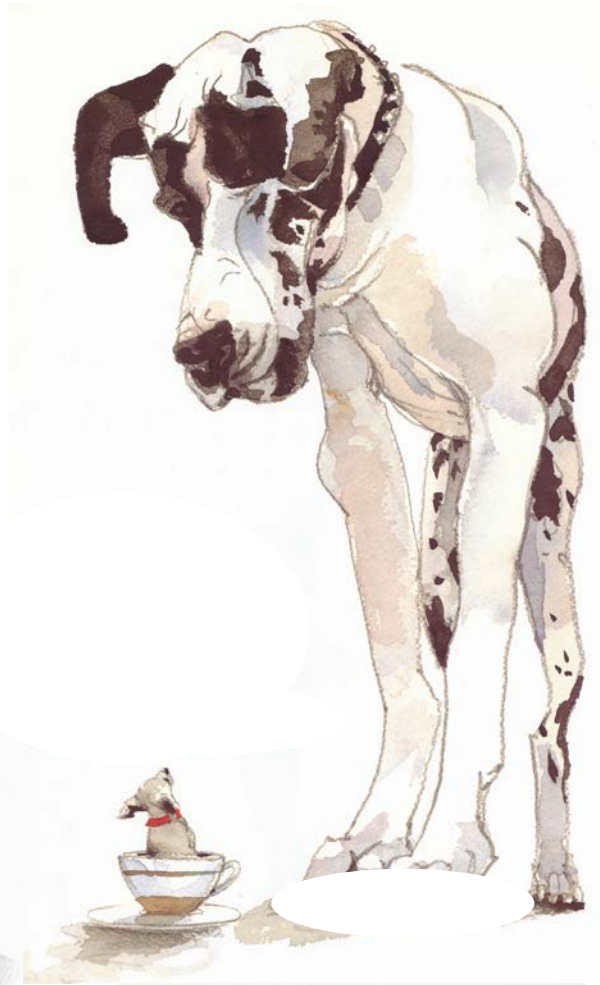


# Airport Scenes



# Illustrations with Dogs

by Mark Anderson



# The Lighter Side

