



ACE First Dates and Scent Gathering Patterns in Dogs

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ACE Free Work continues to blow my mind, as dogs do too; in my humble opinion they are the only canine experts that exist.

ACE Free Work

When dogs have the opportunity to explore and gather data in an ACE Free Work set up they rarely, if ever, respond to environmental information the way their caregiver thinks they will; even if behavior patterns have been practiced and/or reinforced for many years.

ACE Free Work not only offers the dog the chance to process information in their own time, and at their own individual pace, it also gives the human incredible opportunities to stand back and observe the movement and behavior patterns in their canine tutors and companions. There are patterns to everything but we often miss these patterns, or they are so familiar we cease to notice them anymore.

I have observed the way dogs interact with less familiar people in a Free Work set up over the past few years. A clear pattern started to emerge from the moment I began to include the early concepts of ACE Free Work in workshops, one to ones, and in shelters. When dogs are not inhibited by a lead or line and potential pressure to engage with less familiar people is removed, the scenting and data gathering patterns and processes become crystal clear.

ACE Free Work is evolving at a rapid rate, and is applicable for all dogs of all ages and to support dogs on a physical, cognitive, and emotional level. The focus is on shaping the layouts to meet the needs of each individual dog, and to enable the dog to become the pilot of his/her own learning experiences with the dog's guardian or caregiver there as Air Traffic Controller.

We lay out items that help the dog to explore and ultimately engage all his senses, and shape the layouts based on what we see – not what we think might be happening. The focus is always on supporting the dog's internal environment and as has been proven over and over again, this enables the dog to be more thoughtful in the way he/she processes the external environment. Dogs become calmer, more balanced, and more confident regardless of their previous learning experiences.

On our recent in-person ACE practical workshop at Tilley Farm I wrote down the patterns I have observed so participants could watch the dogs as they started their Free Work sessions. Amber, a

delicious Labrador, was the first canine tutor to enter the room. She followed the scenting pattern I had written on the board and I am sharing that pattern here.

ACE First Dates

In ACE we build introductions gradually based on what we see – this is called ACE First Dates. The first part of the ACE First Dates approach is observing how dogs gather valuable information, before we even consider how we might add learning layers by inviting a less familiar person to join the dog in the Free Work set up.

Bottom up Scent Processing

If you have ever taught, or been taught, to give a dog the chance to sniff your hand, think again. This is not what I have noted when dogs are given the choice to collect important data in their own way and in their own time.

‘Bottom-up processing begins with the retrieval of sensory information from our external environment to build perceptions based on the current input of sensory information (Gibson, 1966).’

As well as being a term to describe the process of gathering sensory information as above copied from an article in Psychology Today, this term can also be used in an ACE context to describe the often distinct pattern of how a dog retrieves that important sensory data from less familiar people. When dogs are ready to approach a person, they start that scent retrieval from a person’s shoe and work their way up that person’s body in stages, more often than not returning to the Free Work layout in between each stage.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

This information is for educational purposes only, and is not to be used as a guide on how to introduce dogs to unfamiliar people.

It is important to note that **NONE** of these data gathering patterns are an invitation for direct contact.

I have a lot of experience connecting with, and observing, dogs. I may not start with a dog at liberty in a Free Work setting, or with unfamiliar people in an open Free Work lay out. Safety must always come first – the people must be safe, and the dog must feel safe.

If there is any concern a dog may feel overwhelmed in the company of unfamiliar people, the Free Work is set up in an enclosed area with people watching through windows, or behind a barrier; the dog may be kept on a line. We can give the dog the opportunity to gather important olfactory information in a different way.

Data Gathering Process

Explore

The dog explores the Free Work layout which might include some items that are more familiar to that dog that the guardian/caregiver has brought from home. If safe and appropriate to do so, all equipment such as a collar or harness is removed.

In the following photographs the yellow tub trug, blue mat and raised bone puzzle feeder belong to Amber, and the other stations including the green tub trug are novel Free Work stations for Amber.



Glance

Dogs may lift their head to look at the people, or slide the eyes sideways or up as they are rooting through a snuffle station, engaged at a licking station, or when walking between the stations. If you notice the whites of a dog's eye, it is a sign that a dog doesn't feel emotionally or physically comfortable enough to flex their neck and turn to look directly at the people.

As Amber was exploring this round station (named Aoife's Island) she raised her head and glanced at the people in the room.



Return to ACE Exploration

With stations available to the dog, he/she has the time to gather visual and olfactory information in small increments.

Amber returned to her explorations for a moment before demonstrating the next stage of the data gathering.



Air scent and/or walk by

Watch for extension of the neck and/or a nose twitch – this can be an early sign that something is changing in the dog's internal environment. Some dogs will walk past a person, or people first. Some will air scent then do the walk by. Some will air scent as they start the walk by.

Amber air scented, and then moved towards us in an arc.



Scenting shoe(s) of one or two people

More often than not, dogs do not gather data from every person in the same time frame.

They often approach one or two people, scent their shoe(s), walk past the others, and return to Free Work layout to process.

They gradually work their way around the people in the room part way through the session, or during further Free Work sessions, following the same data gathering pattern.

Amber sniffed Helen's bag on the floor, then her shoes one at a time.



I have seen dogs methodically work their way around a large group gathering data from one or two people at a time, following this same pattern.

Dogs who have a strong history of jumping up at people follow this calm and thoughtful pattern in a Free Work set up, much to the amazement of their guardians. In my experience, they do not go to every person straight away. They scent one or two, then return to the Free Work layout.

After scenting Helen's shoes, Amber walked passed Fiona on her way back to the Free Work set up. Walking past a person still enables a dog to gather scent.



Scenting the lower leg

After shoe scenting, dogs often return to that person and start gathering data from the person's lower leg. They may do this after revisiting Free Work after shoe scenting, or in a subsequent Free Work session. At this point they may well approach someone they have walked past in the first instance, and start the scenting pattern by sniffing that person's shoe.

Scenting the upper body

Once a dog has explored a person's lower leg, they may return and explore that person's upper body. Again this may be in the same Free Work session, or during a following session.

Air scenting the breath

Once the upper body has been explored, the dog may scent that person's breath. They often stand on their back legs and air scent near the person's mouth or lick the air.

This is a tricky one as obviously it can be inappropriate and unsafe for some dogs to have the opportunities to air scent someone's breath – particularly if that person is a child. It can also be misinterpreted as a dog wanting to exchange kisses, which couldn't be further from the truth.

Breath scenting can also be intimidating for someone who may not feel comfortable with a dog raising his/her head towards their face.

Every person's breath has a unique signature and carries so much data that it is totally understandable that a dog, or other animal for that matter, might seek to explore this valuable source of personal sensory data. I have watched Henry gather data from my horses and donkeys by scenting their nostrils from an early age. The horses and donkeys do the same with Henry.

We are playing with ideas for how we might be able to capture some of this information for our more sensitive canine visitors. Amber's ACE guardian, Pauline, noted that Amber sniffed my cup as part of her initial 'walk by' – this is something we are going to explore a little more. Cloth face masks may also have a role to play. We shall see.

Amber's Avenue

Amber was a little worried when she first met my assistant, Mags, outside on the second day. Mags hadn't been at the farm the previous day. I thought about how we could give Amber the chance to start the data gathering process without Mags being in the room. Mags willingly handed over her shoes and tops, and I set up a 'human' chair.

I put Mags' shoes on the floor, and put her clothes on the seat and on the back of the chair. Guess what? Amber began the sequence of data gathering in the same way she had when starting to explore the people in the room on day one.

She started with her exploration in the Free Work laid out for her, air scented towards the chair, went back to exploring the new lay out, then approached and scented Mags' shoes. Unfortunately I didn't capture that on film.



I've put clothing in a Free Work set up before inspired by Sarah Heath some time ago, but I'd never included shoes or set up the clothing in a way that resembled the patterns I had observed. I'm going to set up more 'human' chairs in Free Work from now.

In the ACE tradition of naming Free Work stations or additional learning layers after the dogs who inspired these refinements and modifications, the 'human' chair stations will be named after Amber. One definition of avenue is 'a way of making progress towards something' so Amber's Avenue is the name.

Of course there will be slight variables in the scenting patterns of individual dogs for many reasons, including physical and emotional comfort as not all dogs can lower their head at first, but start watching your dogs or those you connect with through your work. When we stand back and watch more we discover so many details that can help us guide that learning process at an appropriate pace and in an appropriate way for dogs of all ages, and with a range of life experiences.

And of course with careful ACE Observations and mindful set ups ACE Free Work can help us discover endless glorious possibilities to support the dogs in our care; we can reframe our thinking and not get trapped by fixed beliefs that simply may not be true.

Please feel free to discuss, dissect, and/or disseminate this information; if you do want to pass it on, however, please play fair when you share and credit ACE and Amber.