

Genetics, Behavior, and Aggression- Managing Stress and Increasing Adoptability in Shelters

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Challenges of 'Power Breeds'

- High energy, powerful dogs
- Perception by society
- Frequently relinquished
- Not frequently chosen for adoption
- Liability risks

Humane housing and rehoming of ALL shelter pets(including 'power breeds') should involve several aspects....

- _ Provision of physical and mental enrichment
- _ Evaluation of health and welfare
- _ Evaluation of problems hindering adoption
- _ Treatment of problems to improve 'adoptability'
- _ Adoption strategies to increase likelihood of rehoming success

Behavior = Genetics + Environment

- Behavior is ~25% genetics, 75% environment
- Original purposes of breeds...

Rottweiler

- Guard Dog
- Protection Dog
- Herding Dog

German Shepherd Dog

- Herding Dog
- Working Dog
- Protection Dog

Historical Fighting Breeds

- Akita Inu
- Tosa Inu
- Shar Pei
- American Pit Bull Terrier
- Presa Canaria
- Fila Brasileiro
- Kerry Blue Terrier
- Bull Terrier
- Dogue de Bordeaux
- Dogo argentino
- Bulldogs

Pit Bulls

- Bull baiting
- Dog fighting

'High Risk' (for aggression) Dog Breeds

- Pit Bulls (and related breeds)
- Rottweilers
- German Shepherd Dogs
- Chow Chows
- Akitas

'High Risk' (for kennel stress in shelters) Dog Breeds

- Pit Bulls
- Australian Cattle Dogs
- Border Collies
- German Shorthair Pointers

Thresholds and Aggression

Behavior =
Genetics +
Environment

Dogs learn from each and every experience in their lives

- This includes:
 - _ Good experiences
 - _ Bad experiences
 - _ Lack of experiences
 - _ Behavioral assessment tests (in a shelter)

Be a guardian of the dogs you care for

- Protect the dog's environment to avoid negative experiences
- SET UP positive experiences for dogs and PLAN for possible contingencies

Liability

- Shelters can be held liable for aggressive behavior which occurs after adoption
 - _ Known Dangerous or Vicious dogs
 - _ Dogs which show evidence of aggressive tendencies
- Limit liability risks by providing full disclosure at time of adoption

Humane Housing
Provision of Physical and Mental Enrichment

Foundation Behavior Program

- Daily exercise
- Bed/Toys/Mental stimulation
- Social interaction
- People who interact with dogs must learn basic behavior modification techniques

Connecting with Shelter Dogs

- Consistent 'people time'
 - _ Play
 - _ Relaxation
 - _ Training
- Re-establish connection/human-animal bond
- Some do not know that humans are a source of fun/interaction

Conspecific Social Interaction

Never leave two 'fighting breed' dogs alone together

Feeding

- No free food!!!
- Use food as reward for desirable behavior
- Food dispensing toys
- Don't forget sanitation of toys!

Music

- Classical music → calming effect
- Heavy metal music → excitatory effect

Training

- Can reduce behavioral deterioration
- Can increase adoptability

Impulse Control Exercises

- Teach dog that they're allowed to be exuberant, BUT...
- Learn how to control/inhibit behavior

Clicker Training

- Excellent method to give dogs 'control'
- Instills confidence and trust
- Requires motivated/dedicated volunteers

Evaluation

- Health and Welfare
- Problems hindering Adoption

Behavioral Assessment

- When do you assess dogs that enter your shelter?
- Do you REassess dogs?

REassessment

- Medical reassessment
 - _ thorough evaluation
- Common problems which reduce adoptability
 - _ Orthopedic disease
 - _ Lumps/bumps
 - _ Obesity

Common characteristics/problems that lead to poor adoptability/long-term housing

- Over-exuberant behavior
- Barking
- 'Mouthiness'
- Aggression
- Low Sociability
- Breed
- Age

Behavioral Reassessment

- Two weeks after initial assessment
- Repeat standard behavioral assessment
 - _ Compare to previous evaluation
- In-kennel assessment

In-Kennel/Adoption Assessment

- Evaluator MUST be someone unknown to the dog
- Observe dog's behavior in kennel
 - _ Unknown man, woman, child walking by cage
 - _ Dog walking by cage
 - _ Barking, repetitive behaviors?
- Sit in an adoption visitation room with the dog

Assessing Aggression

- Evaluate the dog's **RELATIONSHIP** with people
 - _ Does the dog look to people for support/guidance or does it act independently?
 - _ Empty room test
 - _ Abandonment test

Common Problems CAUSED by long-term housing

- Territorial aggression
- Dog aggression
- Resource Guarding/Possession aggression
- Repetitive behaviors
 - _ Spinning
 - _ Jumping
 - _ Barking
- Asocial behavior
- Separation Anxiety?

Territorial Aggression

- Aggressive behavior occurs **ONLY** in kennel
 - _ Toward unknown humans and or/dogs
 - _ No aggression toward known humans/dogs
- Onset days to weeks after arrival in shelter
- More common in guarding/protection breeds
- DDx : Barrier Frustration, Fear aggression

Barrier Frustration

- Anxiety/destructive behavior which occurs ONLY when pet is confined by barrier (leash or kennel)
- NOT associated with being alone

- **Some people call 'barrier frustration' aggression toward other dogs and humans which occurs when confined/restrained

Stereotyped Behavior-

- Intentional, repetitive behavior that serves no apparent purpose
- Develops in an effort to cope with environmental stress
- Believed to have an internal reward
_ May continue as a favored activity over eating and social interactions

Compulsive Behavior

- Repetitive behaviors or mental acts
- Goal is to prevent or reduce anxiety or distress
- Goal is not to provide pleasure or gratification

Attention-Seeking Behavior

- Normal for a social species to seek attention from others
- Dog learns that behavior earns a reward (attention)
- Just as with children, the reward must not be 'positive' in order for it to be rewarding to the dog

Learned Helplessness

- Due to lack of control over significant environmental events
- Dog 'shuts down' because NOTHING makes a difference
 - _ No distress
 - _ No avoidance of aversive stimulus
 - _ Passive response

Objective lack of control ➡
perception of no control ➡
causal attribution of lack of control ➡
expectation of no control ➡
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Dog in busy shelter ➡
dog attempts different behaviors, no reward ➡
dog understands he has no control ➡
dog expects that he will never be able to change the situation ➡
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Difference between 'kennel crazy' and learned helplessness

- 'Kennel crazy' dogs
 - _ developed behaviors that help them to cope with impoverished environment
- Dogs with learned helplessness
 - _ quiet and poorly interactive with their environment
- Both are signs of severe stress

What is your assessment?



Treatment of Problems

Aggression

Treating Aggression

- Consider risks and liability before treating
- Seek the help of a behaviorist
- Choose carefully
 - _ Consider trainer's experience
 - _ Training methods
 - _ References

Formulating a Plan

- Is this behavior normal vs. abnormal
- Is the plan something you can reasonably achieve?
- Is the plan successful over time?

Preventing aggressive dogs from harming others

- Gentle Leader
- NO prong collars, electronic collars
- Basket muzzle (www.petedge.com)
- Direct stop spray
- Keep on a leash at ALL times

Adoption Strategies
Improve Rehoming Success

Rehoming Long-Term and Challenging Dogs

- Special Concerns
 - _ Housetraining
 - _ Adapting to home environment
 - _ Over/Under-attachment
 - _ Aggression

Initial Recommendations

- Full disclosure to adopter
 - _ Realistic description of what will be required of them
 - _ Risks associated with problem
- Simple, easy to follow instructions
- Provide with behavioral resources
- Emphasize that first few weeks are most important, behaviorally

Routine

- Educate owner about shelter routine
 - _ Feeding times
 - _ Exercise times
 - _ Bedtime
- Encourage owner to follow shelter's routine initially, then wean to their schedule

Nothing in Life is Free

- Creates a structured relationship
- May prevent over-attachment/ overdependence
- Dog must work for everything

Recommendations

- These adopters will need SUPPORT
 - _ Follow-up phone calls
 - _ Training workshops
 - _ Education

Thank You!

- **Resources**

- _ www.vetbehaviorists.org (veterinary behaviorists)
- _ www.apdt.com (pet dog trainers)
- _ www.clickertraining.com
- _ www.hsus.org
- _ www.americanhumane.org
- _ DrS@sacvetbehavior.com
