

Operational Guide

Behavior Assessment Programs



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Introduction

Community perception of the health and temperament of animals available through adoption groups plays a significant role in their adoption rates. If community members have confidence in the knowledge, scrutiny, and resources available to the animal, adoption rates increase. The majority of potential adopters recognize the obligations associated with having a companion animal; they know they must make lifestyle, financial, and emotional commitments, and they are looking for a reliable source of information and animals. Many people purchase an animal from a breeder or pet store because they feel it enables them to be more confident in predicting the personality of the animal. Therefore, word-of-mouth advertising is an effective method to build an adoption program because the experience of friends and family members weigh heavily on decisions of where to obtain an animal from the many choices available. Thus, every happy adopter becomes an ambassador.

In addition to evaluating the health of an animal, one of the first steps to ensure successful placements is the group's ability to determine whether the dog or cat will be a safe companion. Properly conducted temperament assessments build community confidence and help potential adopters properly manage expectations, which is a valuable outcome for those who have been using and promoting temperament assessments.

Animal behavior is dynamic, and there is no way to predict how an animal will respond in every situation. Thus, it is important to understand that although very effective, animal behavior assessments cannot guarantee to predict future behavior. However, assessments do give

us the ability to identify potential issues or concerns.

Communicating Benefits

The primary reason to conduct behavior assessments is to ensure that no animals are needlessly euthanized and that safe companions are being placed into appropriate homes. Behavior assessments allow organizations to make informed, ethical decisions about the animals they place into the community.

Distinguishing specific behaviors can demystify the placement process and clearly identify what would be required to recommend the animal for adoption. With the tools to recognize behavior problems, groups can decide how much rehabilitation they can perform. That flexibility is very valuable when considering the needs of each unique animal, the community, and the level of support and resources required to place the most at-risk animals received. Behavior assessment tools allow groups to put their resources into the animals that they know will be placed in the community; thus, they focus intervention efforts on safe animals and those that can be rehabilitated.

By using a proven assessment tool conducted by trained evaluators, return cases of aggression will decrease. Further, if animals with potential behavior challenges are being placed, counselors can make the new adopters aware of the behavior and give them tools to help decrease the chances of problems emerging in the home and ideas on how to resolve them should they occur.

The objective measures used in assessment programs, if consistently applied, allow for specific, clear cut distinctions about the

animal's behavior. Groups that share a common animal behavior assessment tool are better able to communicate what they have observed to one another. Many collaborative relationships occur between different types of organizations who transfer animals from one location to another. If participating agencies share a common assessment tool, it helps to build trust and overcome the concerns about the intervention required to find homes for transferred animals.

Safety for animal handlers will improve when all animals are evaluated. The potential for incidents of aggression should decrease once identified and handled in a safe manner. In addition, groups can appropriately target socialization and enrichment programs. Once an animal has been evaluated and is determined to be a safe companion, he or she can receive more time and needed attention from caregivers.

Adoption groups are always looking for ways to maximize their effectiveness. Maintaining an objective method of accountability for safe, responsible animal placement that limits liability, increases customer satisfaction, and cultivates long-term community goodwill, making the group a good target for resources and support.

Many animal behavior assessment programs rotate individuals into the evaluation program as they learn and become skilled in the process. Providing training, advancement, and a voice in placement increases confidence, participant/staff satisfaction, and retention.

Reducing Risks

No program is without risk. Prior to placing an animal, all groups should have

legal counsel review their practices and the legal waivers that accompany the program which specifically state that the group does not warrant the disposition or safety of the animal.

Although there are no guarantees, risk also exists for groups that do not conduct evaluations. In case of litigation, submitting information that shows diligence on the part of the group may help. Documentation describing the steps taken in the behavior assessment and that the animal did not display signs of aggressive behavior during the process could mitigate liability. Listing the credentials, research, and training required enhances the assessment's credibility.

Groups that do not assess the medical and behavioral health of animals offered for adoption could jeopardize their reputation and the reliability of their adoption program. Adopting animals that risk human health and safety can significantly undermine the future of any adoption group.

Selecting an appropriate behavior assessment method, choosing individuals to conduct temperament assessments, and training them properly are critical elements to consider. Evaluators that do not have the aptitude, instincts, and proper training run the risk of injury while conducting assessments.

Leadership Support for a Behavior Assessment Program

Successful behavior assessment programs require the support of the entire organization and start with organizational leadership. Maintaining a strong vision for the adoption program, understanding the community and its values, and establishing goals for safe and enduring animal

placement all require top management involvement and commitment. Leadership should also be willing to attract and allocate resources to sustain and consistently improve the program. That includes maintaining long- and short-term strategies and corresponding measurement goals to expand the safety net for animals with problem behaviors and to properly promote the program and its benefits.

Leadership must provide resources and tools to the animal evaluators and handlers to train and effectively implement and monitor an assessment program. Critical to success is an understanding of the research and rationale of the program's methodology in order to maintain a strong belief in the assessment tool and its ability to identify issues and concerns. Participants should be able to articulate, document, and maintain a consistent program. In addition, those involved should be able to inform potential adopters and the public about the value of the program and to maintain a mechanism for feedback to fully integrate and institutionalize the program.

Selecting the Right Assessment Tool

There are several behavior assessment options. With growing interest in the area, there will be even more in the future. However, there are very few behavior assessments that are data driven or that have been researched for their efficacy. Notable practitioners include Amy Marder, PhD, and Pam Reed, PhD, CAAB. Kelly Bollen, MS, has conducted research on a well-known behavior assessment created by Sue Sternberg.

Adoption groups are often asked to make life-and-death decisions. Thus, it is important that the tool used for evaluation has been tested for predictability in both

shelter and homed animals. Using pieces of different assessments or creating/adapting a new evaluation should only be used if the entire assessment, in the proper order, has been validated through research.

There are several other benefits of using a research-based tool like SAFER; it was developed by a qualified technician with doctoral credentials and backed by national animal welfare groups for additional credibility; it is easy to implement and has a certification component which enhances consistency. There also are ample learning aides to assist and support it. And, it is designed to take a qualified evaluator only seven minutes per dog.

Developing a reliable tool involves assessment of available test items, analysis of the process, and plenty of follow-up. It is vital to have a series of experiments designed to assess both false positives and false negatives. We strongly recommend assessing both shelter populations and homed animals to be sure to accurately assess dogs that aggress during the assessment. A strict scientific process is important for proper assessment, including assessors that are blind to the process, control groups of animals that are not assessed, and proper follow-up that allows for unbiased responses to questions that do not lead.

When a behavior assessment program is established, it is also important that all animals be assessed by the same objective standard. Many groups use a "pre-screen" process — such as staring at a dog in his or her kennel. In research developed by one of our authors, Emily Weiss, PhD, she found that behavior in the kennel run is often not correlated with behavior in the home. Behavior assessments can often

increase save rates, as evaluators use objective measures as opposed to a subjective opinion.

Interestingly, the preliminary research with Feline-ality, (a cat behavior assessment in development by Dr. Weiss, for the ASPCA Meet Your Match™ Adoption Program) is finding some similar results; behavior in the cage is not always a proper predictor of home behavior. For example, whether or not a cat uses his or her litter box in a traditional box cage is not predictive of litter box use in the home.

A behavior assessment should not use a black-and-white pass or fail outcome. Each group's resources vary. While one group may not be able to address specific behavior challenges, another could easily modify the animal's behavior. In addition, for some groups, resources change from season to season. If an assessment is only pass/fail, the ability to work with at-risk animals does not take into account the myriad of options that could be brought to bear. That information can be a valuable tool in communicating the need for more volunteers, additional community support, and development of future plans for behavior intervention, facility changes, and additional training for caregivers.

Avoiding Dog Breed Bias

Pressure from inside and outside adoption groups often dictate whether to restrict the placement of particular breeds. Many breeds are automatically recommended for households without children or those with other animals already in the home. Such recommendations are not always valid and limit the already-narrow pool of potential households. Appropriate behavior assessments remove the need to perpetuate

breed stereotypes because they prevent dangerous dogs from being adopted.

If groups focus on the individual dog, as opposed to the breed in general, they can better assure safe dogs are made available for adoption. While certain breeds have a higher likelihood of causing severe injury when aggression does occur, there are thousands of dog bite victims that are permanently maimed by breeds that may not be restricted.

The goal is to best assure that safe dogs — whether they are cocker spaniels or pit bulls — are given the opportunity for a lifelong home. A behavior assessment is a more accurate and appropriate method for screening adoption candidates than is breed, thus allowing adoption groups to promote the positive aspects of a breed instead of perpetuating myths.

According to the Centers for Disease Control's Injury Center, "researchers examined data about deadly dog attacks that occurred during 1979–1998. They found that at least 25 breeds of dogs had been involved in the fatal attacks. However, pit bull-type dogs and Rottweilers were involved in more than half of the deaths for which the breed was known. Of the 227 fatal attacks for which data were available, more than two-thirds of attacks involved a single dog, and more than half involved dogs that were untrained on their owner's property. The findings of this study provide insight into the circumstances surrounding deadly dog attacks that may help shape prevention efforts."

The Center for Disease Control also states that, "The CDC must also develop, implement, and evaluate prevention programs. Potential prevention strategies

include programs promoting responsible dog ownership; training programs to increase desired canine behavior; programs to teach children how to act around dogs; enhanced animal control programs; and education for veterinarians and the general public. In addition, we must look at the effectiveness of legislation to regulate dangerous or vicious dogs.”

Designing the Program

Each adoption group must evaluate and access the amount of time, space, technology, staffing, and training resources available to them prior to embarking upon a behavior assessment program. Veterinary medical assessments are also important because they rule out medical issues that could impact behavior.

Each group must decide what behaviors to assess. At a minimum, evaluate:

- Fear aggression
- Possession aggression
- Prey issues
- Dog aggression

Require two people to be involved in each evaluation — one tester and one observer. Before working together, they should first test their “inter-rater reliability” by each viewing video of assessments separately and then checking their scoring against one another. Look for agreement at least 85 percent of the time.

While there is no puppy test that is predictive of future behavior, puppy evaluations can give us good information about the puppy’s behavior at the time of testing so that we can find the best match for the puppy. The ASPCA Meet Your Match Puppy-ality Adoption program™ is one option for a puppy assessment.

Implementing the Program

Send the assessment team for training. If there is an available certification process, be sure that the evaluators pursue becoming certified.

Train the entire group in the rationale, research, and philosophical underpinnings for the program.

Create a monitoring system for information acquired during the assessment.

Maintain a plan for at-risk animals that realistically addresses your group’s abilities and the community’s level of support.

Be sure to videotape and archive the footage tests.

Devote a room for evaluations. It needs to be quiet and free from animals, storage supplies, and distractions.

Devote a space for all supplies needed for the assessment. To assess quickly and effectively, all supplies should be well stocked and stored in a high cabinet in the assessment room, including food, Access a Hand, paperwork, and video equipment.

Be sure you give the evaluators adequate time to assess each animal. This will vary dependant upon what assessment tool you choose.

It is important to know whether the assessment tool you choose is predictive at intake or if it requires the animal to adjust in his or her new surroundings for a period of time before assessment. For example, recent data collection with SAFER has found it to be a predictive tool at intake.

Be sure there are supplies to stop a dog should it aggress. Keep Direct Stop™ and an air horn handy.

Structure animal housing and evaluation areas so that you can prevent the spread of disease between animals.

Conduct assessments prior to sterilization as the surgery can cause the animal to behave oddly due to pain and anesthesia effects. If the animal is sterilized first, be sure to wait until anesthesia is fully out of the animal's system and proper healing has occurred.

Determining When to Re-evaluate Animals

Ideally, an animal can be medically and behaviorally assessed, receive appropriate treatment and procedures, and find a new home as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, that does not always occur. In some cases, animals spend months with an adoption group prior to transfer or adoption. Behavior is not static and can quickly change, which is why it is vital to re-evaluate animals after a period of time. It is not unreasonable to reassess after four weeks. If assessing puppies, it is vital to reassess after two weeks at an absolute maximum. In addition to understanding the current needs of the animal, that information enables groups to better understand the level of physical and mental enrichment required to meet the animal's needs. Lack of enrichment and social interaction quickly degrade an animal's behavior. Therefore, all facilities should develop minimum guidelines for enrichment and socialization.

Identifying Evaluators

Any behavior assessment takes training to learn. Pivotal to evaluator success is that the person be able to remain objective and

have the ability to accurately read behavior. Contrary to popular belief, evaluators do not need to be canine experts.

However, they do need to be trained to assess in the appropriate manner, and they must have confidence in the assessment tool.

It is important that the teams chosen to assess the animals have good communication skills and are respected by the staff. They should be able to take direction well and be detail oriented. Those that excel have keen observational skills and can develop good animal handling skills. Being able to detect when an animal is exhibiting signs of stress, differentiating between a variety of body postures and eye movements, and the ability to understand the social behavior of animals are all valuable skills.

Building Program Support

Avoid making the process a secret. It is helpful if everyone involved with the group understands and believes in the evaluation process. This can be facilitated by providing some level of training regarding the assessment, including the scientifically validated credentials of the process to strengthen the understanding and trust in the tool.

Flexibility regarding a particular response to a specific assessment item is helpful. Be sure the assessment team focuses on each animal as an individual. They should always investigate potential options for individual animals.

Do not expect current evaluators to train new evaluators. Maintain the integrity of the program by ensuring that qualified trainers perform the training; seek out certified trainers.

Include information and open discussion about the behavior assessment program in your group's meetings to curtail misconceptions about the program.

Have demonstrations or videos that show successful placement because of the evaluation program.

Look for ways to involve the community in maintaining the behavioral health of animals in your program; exercise, enrichment, socialization, training, and veterinary follow-up.

Expanding the Safety Net

Once a particular behavior is identified, a group can properly track the animal through to the most humane conclusion — re-homing, long-term foster, in-house rehabilitation, or, as a last resort, euthanasia. If there are tested behavior modification programs for a particular concern, attempt those programs. More work is needed to develop and disseminate programs that are proven to work in shelter animals. The CARE program at Wisconsin Humane Society is one example of a program developed to modify behavior issues identified during assessment (in this case, the SAFER test). The program is designed to develop and research behavior modification programs for dogs and puppies. To date, hundreds of at-risk dogs have been saved with the program.

Options to rehabilitate individual animals are dependent upon the resources available. Each community and each group is unique. Behavior modification programs may be compelling for donors and can be developed once assessment is in place.

Evaluating Program Success

Base evaluation and monitoring upon the goals established for the program. They might include increased adopter satisfaction, a reduction in return rates and euthanasia rates, and increased adoptions which correspondingly result in decreased length of animal stay and overcrowding. Information obtained during the evaluation process can help to target post-adoption follow-up, increase intervention and enrichment, and provide more information for foster placements.

Conclusion

Successful behavior assessment programs start with organizational leadership to establish the vision, allocate appropriate resources, and develop support throughout the group. By using a proven, pre-adoption assessment tool conducted by properly trained evaluators, groups maintain an objective method of accountability for safe animal placement that increases awareness of the individual and unique needs of each animal, increases adoption, limits liability, increases customer satisfaction, and cultivates long term community goodwill.

Additional Resources:

SAFER Video and Workbook – available through American Humane Association – www.americanhumane.org

Assess-A-Pet – www.suesternberg.com

SAFER II Video or DVD – www.emilyweiss.com

Bark magazine, Spring 2004. Dog is in the Details.

Meet Your Match Workbook and Video – Available through the ASPCA (www.aspca.org)

HSUS Animal Sheltering, Sept-Oct and Nov-Dec 2003 – Assess with Success.

Center for Disease Control’s Injury Center’s website: http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/fact_book/14_Dog_Bite_Injuries.htm