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Letter from Maddie's Fund



Dear Animal Advocate,

In this month's featured article, Sheila Segurson DVM, DACVB tackles the controversial topic of Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters. Dr. Segurson was the first veterinarian to successfully complete Maddie's® Shelter Medicine Residency Training in animal behavior with an emphasis on animal sheltering.

Rich Avanzino follows up with his thoughts in a Behavior Assessment editorial.

The first Arizona Animal Advocates Volunteer Conference was held in Phoenix last February. The idea was to create a standardized, competency-based training for animal welfare volunteers. The conference's amazing success is described inside.

The Dubuque Regional Humane Society is one of a growing number of animal welfare organizations publishing their shelter statistics using the Asilomar Accords definitions and tables. Click here to view Dubuque's 2006 shelter statistics.



Best regards,
The Maddie's Fund Team



Features

Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters

by Sheila Segurson, DVM, DACVB

Early in my residency program at UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Maddie's® Shelter Medicine Program, I set a goal to complete a behavioral assessment project as part of the research requirements for my residency. I spent hundreds of hours observing and performing behavioral assessment tests and read and reviewed research publications regarding the subject. I observed the most commonly performed tests, Sue Sternberg's Assess-a-Pet test and Emily Weiss' SAFER test, as well tests performed at many other shelters. Many shelters which I visited performed a variation of Sue Sternberg's test, adapted to their experiences and requirements. As I became more and more experienced with behavioral assessments, I also became increasingly aware of their limitations.

In this article, I will discuss testing and personality, methods to increase the usefulness of the test you are using, the importance (and guidelines for) developing a shelter behavioral program, and frequently asked questions regarding behavioral evaluation of shelter animals.

Behavioral Assessment

Ancient Greeks, most notably Hippocrates and Plato, first formulated the four temperaments (also known as the 'four humours') as ideas regarding character, health and personality. These temperament types were defined as: phlegmatic (reliable, even-tempered), choleric (optimistic, impulsive, and aggressive), sanguine (cheerful, optimistic), and melancholic (quiet, pessimistic). It is from this model that many models of human (and animal) personality and temperament were later developed.

Ivan Pavlov, who most of us remember with regard to classical conditioning and dogs salivating in response to ringing a bell, also evaluated the behavior of the dogs in his studies and argued that different temperament types responded differently to his experiences. He classified his dogs into four temperament types, just as the ancient Greek did. Some dogs were very excitable (easily aroused), but quickly calmed down (good inhibition); these dogs were called sanguine. Some dogs were very excitable, but had poor inhibition of their behavior; these dogs were called choleric. Other dogs were not easily arousable and had good inhibition (phlegmatic) or were not easily arousable and had poor inhibition (melancholic). He stated that phlegmatic and sanguine dogs had 'strong' nervous systems, and choleric and melancholic dogs had less stable nervous systems. It is quite interesting to think about these categories and where some of the dogs in our lives have fit into them, and how these categories might influence how we train and manage our dog's lives.

'Temperament Testing'

I strongly disagree with the use of the term 'temperament testing' with regard to shelter behavioral evaluations. 'Temperament' is based on our genetics and is our innate and natural way of responding to our environment. Character is based on our environment and experiences; it is the habits and behaviors we have developed as a result of our experiences. The combination of temperament and character produce our personality.



Human psychologists agree that it is often inaccurate and inappropriate to judge someone's personality based on a one-time meeting or experience. Our personalities are different in different circumstances, and these differences constitute the uniqueness of who we are.

It is virtually impossible for a shelter to assess 'temperament' via a one-time test. Temperament is something that we learn about someone by watching their reactions (or questioning them about them) over a broad range of environments and experiences. Most shelters do not have the time or the resources to do this, and thus they are assessing behavior at a point in time, and not true temperament.

Stress and Behavioral Assessment

As much as we try to enrich shelter pet lives, shelters are a stressful place to be. Stress changes a pet's behavior. Some pets will behave more aggressively when stressed, some more fearfully, and some will be quieter and more inhibited. It is important to recognize the role of stress on our behavioral evaluation results. If a dog is aggressive, is it because she is really stressed? If he is NOT aggressive, is it because she is inhibited due to stress?

Some people feel that it is very valuable to assess a pet's behavior when they are very stressed (and using stress inducing techniques) - they want to know 'what is the worst thing that this pet will potentially do in a home', so that they can protect the public from harm. Some pets will never experience a stress as great as that of being in a shelter (and thus the test is unfairly harsh) and unfortunately, some pets will have a more stressful life than they had in the shelter. There is no way to accurately predict their future experiences and thus no way to accurately create an appropriately stressful test for proponents of this method.

Other people feel that it is valuable to assess a pet's behavior in as home-like of a setting as possible, to attempt to assess a pet's characteristics in situations and environments where they will likely live. This test method is my preference for shelters. Stress certainly influences the reliability of this technique as well, but my opinion is that it is a more 'fair' representation of a pet's personality. We do not yet have research published in a peer reviewed journal regarding commonly used shelter assessment tests. Until this is available, I prefer to err on the side of reducing their stress.

Assessing a Behavioral Characteristic and the Importance of Details – Sociability

When I first started testing, I attempted to behave in a clinical and passive manner toward dogs when I assessed their friendliness toward people. I noticed that many of the dogs did not approach me until I first showed some sign of friendliness toward them. With some shelters, this might give a dog a marginal score and increase the likelihood that they would be euthanized.

I thought about things from the dog's standpoint. 'Max' has been held in a kennel for 5 days. People have rarely shown signs of friendliness toward him and may reprimand him when he tries to say 'hi' (barking or jumping up), but primarily ignore him. Now we take him out and expect him to be calm and friendly, when we are showing no signs of friendliness toward him. In most situations, it is entirely appropriate (and often desirable)

for a dog to avoid interacting with us unless we show signs of a desire to interact with them, even though in a test situation some evaluators may consider this behavior undesirable. A person who does not show signs of friendliness has more potential to harm a dog than a human who is friendly to dogs.

Another alternative way to think about this situation involves a dog (that I don't know) who is standing in front of me with a very still body posture (no wagging tail, no relaxed body posture, etc.). This is a dog whom I approach with caution. It is appropriate for a dog who understands human body language to do the same. When I assess sociability, I start by saying a friendly hello to the dog (with words and body language, but not petting) so that the dog knows that I wish to interact with her.

Assessing Behavior – Other Techniques

Because most shelters do not use a test which has been proven reliable, it is important to use other diagnostic aids when evaluating behavior. Behavioral questionnaires for people relinquishing their pets can provide potentially valuable information. Dr. James Serpell and colleagues developed the C-BARQ (Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire) which was designed to provide professionals with standardized evaluations of canine temperament and behavior. This test was recently utilized in shelter research project; more information is available at <http://www.vet.upenn.edu/cbarq/>. Shelters should also use the day- to-day experiences and evaluation of kennel staff and volunteers who have been trained about canine/feline body language and behavioral observation. Lastly, utilize behavior experts in your area when needed. Expert advice can help shelters to manage individual animals and provide continuing education.

Increasing the Test's Reliability

- **Training:** One person's definition of aggression may be very different than the next. Shelters should have a behavioral assessment handbook which clearly defines the test itself, provides definitions for behaviors, and criteria for outcome decisions. Staff members who perform behavioral evaluations should undergo training about pet body language and the test and receive periodic reviews (to assess inter- and intra-rater reliability). This can be done by videotaping assessments and then meeting to discuss modification of techniques and provide further education.
- **Performing the Test:** Testers should work in teams; it is easy to miss a subtle body language signal when you are standing above the pet and an assistant can keep you safe, and help in the evaluation process. The test should be performed in a room designated for behavior evaluations and a room as free as possible of potentially stressful distractions such as loud noises and other animals. Take all dogs outside to eliminate before testing (a houstrained dog may 'fail' the test because he urgently needs to get outside and isn't interested in interacting with people).
- **Bias:** Don't test dogs that you are biased about. I will not test red pit bulls; I owned a wonderful red pit bull for 15 years and it would be very difficult for me to NOT be biased toward a dog with characteristics similar to that dog. Alternatively, if you don't like Chihuahuas because you have had a bad

experience in the past, recognize that you may be negatively biased. Part of being a good evaluator means recognizing your weaknesses and taking steps to make certain they don't reduce your objectivity. Remember that some biases are appropriate. Pit bulls were bred (and many still are) to be aggressive toward other dogs and Belgian Malinois are bred for protection. While not all Malinois are protective, these are genetic traits, and should be taken into consideration when evaluating a dog.

Developing a Shelter Behavior Program

While behavior assessment tests are often the most talked about aspect of behavioral care in a shelter, the test is (or should be) only a small portion of a shelter's behavioral program.

[Click here](#) to continue with Dr. Segurson's thoughts on what the goals and key components of a shelter behavior program should be.

[Click here](#) to view her pie chart depicting the key components of shelter behavior programs.

[Click here](#) to view her example of a written scoring or assessment system which will help to guide classification (healthy, treatable-manageable, treatable-rehabilitatable, and unhealthy/untreatable) and outcome decisions.



Features

Behavior Assessment An editorial by Rich Avanzino, Maddie's Fund President

One of the hottest topics in animal sheltering continues to be behavior assessment, or as it's sometimes called, temperament testing.

Critics say temperament tests are subjective, overly stringent and unfair. The animals who fail are euthanized in the name of public safety, and the shelters go on to talk about the great job they're doing in saving lives.

Of course every animal shelter must make determined efforts to ensure its animal placements are not a threat to public safety. This is the only responsible thing to do.

But I'm in total agreement with Dr. Sheila Segurson when she says in her article [Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters](#): "It's virtually impossible for a shelter to assess 'temperament' via a one-time test. Temperament is something that we learn about someone by watching their reactions over a broad range of environments and experiences."

In a perfect world, an initial assessment would be just the first step in a broader program that would include evaluations by different experts at different times, different settings for evaluations including foster homes, treatment plans for rehabilitation, and time and resources to implement treatment plans.

Some progressive animal shelters may be able to provide this already. And I'm looking forward to the day when all shelters can put comprehensive behavior programs in place—when 'one time only' pass/fail tests are a thing of the past.

Dogs and cats in animal shelters deserve to be given a real chance to show who they really are, and to demonstrate that their initial behavior may be a reaction to a very stressful and scary environment, not a threat to public safety.

In a shelter world focused on the importance of every pet's life, all avenues will be explored before a final decision is made to put a dog or cat to death.





Making a Difference

The Arizona Animal Advocates Volunteer Conference and Certification Program:

A new approach to volunteer training

"This conference enabled volunteers to understand that we're all in it together—it's better to share than to have a "we do it better than they do" attitude. It also allowed us to see ourselves as part of a community-wide system for animal care verses a group of individual organizations."

[Click [here](#) to view the conference program and [here](#) to view statistical outcomes.]

In what surely must be a world record, a community volunteer training conference went from concept to execution in a little over two months—and was an enormous success. The Arizona Animal Welfare League's Malin Borg and Jeannine Alexander describe the conference genesis, goals and accomplishments.

In 2006, more than 100,000 animals were surrendered to Maricopa County shelters. Caring for these animals requires the sheltering and rescue community to rely heavily on volunteers. During the winter of 2006, a multi-agency discussion started about the benefits of creating some form of standardized, competency-based training for all animal welfare volunteers. This discussion evolved into meetings attended by management-level or executive representatives of the largest organizations in the state. The discussions centered on identifying the primary needs within the organizations, the benefits of such a training collaboration, and how such a training tool would work. Within a very short period of time the discussions matured into concrete plans for an initial two-day conference followed by continuing education and certification programs with basic and advanced tracks.

The goal of this conference was three-fold:

- to attract new volunteers and provide those volunteers with the knowledge and tools needed to more quickly become valuable additions to the community's volunteer base.
- to provide further training for current volunteers by taking advantage of the different areas of expertise existing within the different animal welfare organizations in Arizona.
- to present the identified needs of the animal welfare community as a whole, how each organization fits into the community response to homeless companion animals, and to teach tolerance and mutual understanding of our community partners.

The first Arizona Animal Advocates Volunteer Conference was held in Phoenix, Arizona in February 2007 with 134 volunteer-attendees. 23% of the attendees were new. 77% were active volunteers representing 22 different organizations. Attendees were primarily Maricopa County residents, but a few came from Tucson, Casa Grande and Flagstaff.



The speakers and trainers from state-wide animal welfare organizations were selected for their individual expertise, and represented six different agencies: Arizona Animal Welfare League and SPCA (adoption guarantee shelter, Phoenix), Arizona Humane Society (traditional shelter, Phoenix), Humane Society of Southern Arizona (traditional shelter, Tucson), Maricopa County Animal Care and Control (county animal control, Phoenix), Second Chance Center for Animals (adoption guarantee shelter, Flagstaff) and AZCATS (TNR group, Phoenix).

Conference Results

The most encouraging result of the conference, as reported on the evaluation forms, was that 77 percent of the attendees left feeling “increased motivation” to donate their time to animal welfare – in just one weekend. The second, and perhaps more important result is that 84 percent of the attendees indicated that they would like to complete the certification program and continue on to an advanced curriculum (81%).

In addition, the event drew a broader cross-section of the animal welfare community than originally anticipated, as members of twenty-two (22) organizations registered for the event. This included two county animal control agencies, two humane societies, two adoption guarantee shelters, rescue groups, a feral cat group, and advocacy groups.

Certification Program

The attendees of the conference indicated that they were overwhelmingly interested in completing a certification process (84%) and likewise were interested in pursuing an advanced certification (81%). This indicates that the currently available training opportunities offered throughout the community are insufficient. Part of the mission of this initiative is to raise the standards of working knowledge of those involved with the animal rescue/sheltering community. Having a greater variety and more advanced tools will allow the participants to have more beneficial interaction with the animals in our care. For example, their increased skills and knowledge will ultimately enhance adoptability and retention by further promoting the transformation of the “shelter/rescue animal” to a “well-adjusted” companion animal/pet that is ready to assume a within a new family.

The four training components that remain as requirements for completion of the initial certification process will require smaller groups and hands-on training. In these components the cognitive/academic knowledge that the attendees acquired at the conference will be applied to the practical, real-life situations that they encounter while working with animals.

The four remaining components are (choice of dog or cat track): dog/cat handling and restraint, dog/cat breed identification and temperament characteristics, in-depth dog/cat behavior, and Ambassador Training. Ambassador Training is required so that the participants can confidently and clearly speak about animals and animal care, representing the animal welfare community at public events and in social interactions. This certification would provide in-depth training in singular topics that encourage the participants to take a leadership role in the areas of specialization.



The Maricopa animal welfare community has entered an unprecedented era of cooperation and collaboration. The community remains careful to protect and eager to act on the recently achieved momentum. Successful completion of the introductory conference, knowledge-based exam, and the four practical components will culminate in the award of Certified Animal Advocate Volunteer status. We hope to certify our first volunteers late this spring/early summer.

The Advanced Certification Program

This certification has as its purpose to increase the depth of knowledge within specialized fields and consequently translate to broadened community participation within that specialty. Some examples of advanced “majors” of specialization include: Foster (developmental, behavioral and medical), Community Disaster Response (animal sheltering and technical rescue), Medical (CPR/First Aid, spay/neuter clinic assistance) and Behavior (enrichment, training and behavior protocol implementation).

Postscript

Because we had so little time, it was hard to broadly publicize this event. But even with very little advertising, people had to be turned away because the venue couldn't accommodate them.

We would like to hold the conference once a year and use it as a recruitment tool to attract greater numbers of people not already affiliated or volunteering with any organization. Next year we will be able to really utilize the media and get the word out.

Our certification program will begin this summer. Many volunteers have already expressed interest.



Maddie's Adoptions

Maddie's® Pet Rescue Project in Alachua County, Florida

www.maddiespetrescueofalachua.org/links_partners.shtml



Nida & Tinkerbell

(Alachua County Animal Services) (Helping Hands Rescue)

Love comes in all shapes and sizes in Alachua County, Florida.
Go to the collaboration partners' websites to see the animals waiting to follow you home.

Maddie's® Pet Rescue Project in Maricopa County, Arizona

<http://www.commonpaws.org/animalsadopt.asp>



Spice & Deeter

(Maricopa County Animal Care and Control) (Arizona Animal Rescue & Sanctuary)

Thinking about adding to your family?
Come see about the furry friends Maricopa County has up for adoption.



Maddie's[®] Pet Rescue Project in New York City
<http://www.animalallianceny.org/services/adoption.htm>



Millie & Anna
(Animal Haven) (City Critters)

Adopt a little New Yorker today!
Visit BigApplePets.com for the best companions the five boroughs have to offer.

Maddie's[®] Pet Rescue Projects in Alabama
www.maddie-alabama.org



Gracie & Quincy
(T-Town Paws, Tuscaloosa) (Baldwin County Humane Society, Fairhope)

Maddie's[®] Alabama projects share a website with links
to some of the finest dogs and cats to be found
in Baldwin County, Mobile, and Tuscaloosa.