Your Secret Feline Decoder Ring: Feline Behavior Assessments

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Agenda

• Components of a shelter behavior program
• Cats vs. dogs
• Definition of behavior assessments
• Use of behavior assessments
• Goals of behavior assessments
• Challenges with using behavior assessments
• Available feline behavior assessment tools
• Performing feline behavior assessments
• Conclusions

Components of a Shelter Behavior Program

• Surrender prevention
• Behavior assessment
• Welfare in the shelter
• Bringing out the best
• Adoption
• Post-adoption support
**Cats vs. Dogs**

- Numerous studies regarding behavior assessments for dogs have been conducted\(^2\,^3\,^4\,^5\)

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**Cats vs. Dogs**

Dogs have owners, cats have staff.  - Unknown

Dogs believe every stranger is a friend they haven’t met yet. Cats wait for a proper invitation.  - Vicki Brown

Dogs come when they’re called. Cats take a message and get back to you.  - Mary Bly

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**Cats vs. Dogs**

- **Differences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Cats</th>
<th>Dogs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social structure</td>
<td>Independence with social relationships</td>
<td>Deference within a pack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Facial expressions, body postures, smell, and vocalization</td>
<td>Facial expressions, body postures, and body contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>Territory</td>
<td>Pack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Cats vs. Dogs

• Behavior assessments for dogs cannot be applied to cats

Definition of Behavior Assessments

• Definition = A tool that attempts to identify attributes which characterize an individual animal’s conduct at a point in time

Definition of Behavior Assessments

Additional Definitions

• Temperament = Emotional Responses
• Character = Environment + Experiences
• Personality = Temperament + Character
**Definition of Behavior Assessments**

**Temperament**
- Temperament = Emotional Responses
- Natural or innate responses to the environment
- Based on genetics and experiences during early development

**Character**
- Character = Environment + Experiences
- Learning history that is influenced by changing environment

**Personality**
- Personality = Temperament + Character
- Overall way of responding to the environment
- Characteristics that make us unique
Use of Behavior Assessments

• An ancillary tool
  • Added to information from other resources
    • Owner relinquishment/surrender questionnaires
    • Staff and volunteer experiences
  • Not a pass/fail test of adoptability
  • Ongoing “mini-assessments” (i.e., behavior rounds)

Goal of Behavior Assessments

• Identify needs of the individual cat
• Input for shelter pathway planning
• Ultimate goal MATCH pet with best possible home

Goals of Behavior Assessments

Individual Cat

• Gather baseline information
  • Starts with first surrender contact with caregiver
  • Similar to a physical exam, but for behavior
  • What’s needed to bring out the best
  • Start of providing for the cat’s welfare
Goals of Behavior Assessments
Pathway Planning

- Decision making for the shelter population
  - Individual determines path → Decision making
  - Helps answer the question, “Does the shelter have the resources to save this cat?”
  - Important in identifying live-saving alternatives

Goals of Behavior Assessments
Pathway Planning

Behavior Assessment
- Feral
- Friendly

Behavior Mod
- Rural home
- Indoor home

Adoption

Goals of Behavior Assessments
Ultimate Goal → Match Pet with Best Home
Challenges with using Behavior Assessments

• Need for standardization
• Improving reliability
• Validation of results
• Need for additional studies with cats

Challenges
Need for Standardization

• Good assessment ⊇ Only variable is the animal being assessed
  • Difficult to do
• Assessment is performed, recorded, and reported in the same manner
• Reduces evaluation variability

Challenges
Improving Reliability

• Training
  • Behavior assessment handbook
    • Defines the evaluation
    • Provides definitions for behaviors
    • Criteria for outcome decisions
  • Cat body language
Challenges
Improving Reliability

- Periodic evaluator reviews
- Evaluators work in teams
- Assessments performed in a designated room
- Remove yourself if biased

Challenges
Validation of Results

- Are we really measuring what we think we are measuring?
  - Ultimately:
    - Identifying needs of the individual cat?
    - Providing input for Pathway Planning?
    - Matching the cat to best possible home?
    - Predicting behavior in the new home?
    - Protecting the public from harm?
- Studies that validate feline behavior assessments are limited
  - Commonly sited study was done in 2003

Challenges
Need for Additional Studies with Cats

- Need for additional studies to validate feline behavior assessments
- Necessary for accuracy and reliably
**Feline Behavior Assessment Tools**

- What shelters are using:
  1. Nationally available programs
  2. No formal program (observations and experience)
  3. Shelter designed program (in-house)

**Nationally Available Programs**

- American Humane Association
- ASPCA Meet Your Match Feline-ality™
- BCSPCA CatSense™
- Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine
- Pet Behavior Solutions Core Behavior Assessment for Cats

**Feline-ality™**

- Research-based
- Assessment of cat’s behavior matched with adopter lifestyle and preferences
- Pairs distinct cat characteristics with adopter

Your Secret Feline Decoder Ring: Feline Behavior Assessments

Tools

* CatSense™
  - Research-based
  - Daily welfare assessment
  - Matching animals and adopters
  - Guide for ensuring good welfare
  - Hide, Perch & Go box™
  
  [http://www.spcabc.ca/welfare/professional-resources/catsense/catsense.html](http://www.spcabc.ca/welfare/professional-resources/catsense/catsense.html)

Tools

* Shelter Designed (In-house) Programs
  - Animal Care & Control of NYC Behavior Designation
  - Animal Humane Society Feline Evaluation for Adoption (FEFA)
  - Animal Rescue League of Boston
  - Dane County Friends of Ferals
  - Oshkosh Area Humane Society Catitude Assessment

Performing Feline Behavior Assessments

* Who?
* When?
* Where?
* How is it done?
* How is it used?
Performing

Who?

• Ideally, all cats in the shelter
• At a minimum:
  • Special needs cats (medical and/or behavioral)
  • Cats going to foster care

Performing

When?

• Stress may decrease the longer a cat is in a shelter
  • But may increase, too…
• No clear-cut time
  • There is a need for more research in this area
• Many perform assessments at or after 3 days

Performing

Where?

• Start at cage side
• Remove cat from cage
  • Using carrier, transfer to a larger, calmer, and quieter living space
  • Helpful in improving behavior
Performing

Where?

• Ideally, done in an area:
  • Free of noise, traffic, and other distractions
  • Separated from ALL other animals
  • No hiding places (other than carrier)
  • Smaller room (approximately 10’ x 10’)
  • If not available, exercise pen in larger room

Performing

How is it Done?

• Initial behavior assessment
• Staff and volunteer observations
• Behavior rounds (“mini-assessments”)
• Use of behavior experts in the area

Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

• If surrendered, start with review of relinquishment/surrender form
• Use a point system to reduce bias
Performing
How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Stress and anxiety
  - Consider the influence of this on behavior
    - May result in increased OR decreased fear and/or aggression
  - Common causes:
    - NOISE!
    - Confined (small) living conditions
    - Proximity to other animals
    - Exposure to unfamiliar people
    - Change in schedule
    - Separation from family
    - Lack of exercise
    - Lack of relaxation/sleep

Performing
How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Common signs:
  - Hiding
  - Hyper-alert
  - Freezing
  - Crouching
  - Calculated movement
  - Increased or decrease movement
  - Eyes wide open with dilated pupils or shut tight
  - Lack of grooming
  - "Airplane ears"
  - Tail tucked
  - Anorexia
  - Excessive vocalization

Performing
How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Performing the evaluation
  - Starts at the cat’s cage
Performing
How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

• Performing the evaluation
  • Introduction to novel room
    • Note time it takes the cat to exit the carrier
    • Allow the cat to explore the room for 5 minutes, noting behavior

Performing
How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

• Performing the evaluation
  • After introduction to novel room, note response to:
    • Calling
    • Closed then open hand
    • Stroking
    • Play
    • Hugging
    • Sensitivity (e.g., holding paw, grasping tail, etc.)

Performing
How is it Done? Staff and Volunteer Observations

• Includes the day-to-day observations and experiences of staff and volunteers
  • Should be trained about feline body language and behavioral observation
• Update behavior record
Performing
How is it Done?  Behavior Rounds

• Done after initial behavior assessment
• Ideally, performed three times/week
• “Mini-Assessments” ▸ Walk through shelter to briefly assess each cat
  • Medical intervention needed?
  • Behavioral intervention needed?
  • Foster care needed?
  • Review and update behavior record
• Adjunct to the daily medical rounds

Performing
How is it Done?  Use of Behavior Experts

• Use when needed
• Can help shelters:
  • Manage individual animals
  • Provide continuing education
• Resource:
  • American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB)
    • Website: http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/

Performing
How is it Used?

• Categorization
• Needs of individual cat
  • Fast track to adoption
  • Behavior modification program
  • Type of home
• Decision making about shelter population
• Matching cat with adopter
Conclusions

• Behavior assessments helpful with achieving our ultimate goal ➔ Match pet with best home

• Starts with organizational leadership
  • Establish a vision
  • Allocated appropriate resources
  • Develop support
  • We have to start somewhere

References


