



***Shelter Dog Mod Squad: Identifying and Modifying
Canine Behavior Problems in Shelters***

Live Webcast Audience Questions and Answers

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December 6, 2012

- 1) **Q: How long does a dog typically stay in the shelter before you adopt them out? How long does behavior modification take? What do your employees and volunteers do to train the adoptive parents?**

A: Typically the dogs are with us anywhere from a few days, to weeks or even months. The duration of behavior modification depends upon the problem behavior; the dog may receive no behavior modification (other than basic training and enrichment), or may receive several weeks before being placed on the adoption floor. We conduct a special adoption meeting before the dog goes home with a family, where we attempt to make certain that the dog and the family are a good match. This involves meeting the entire family and any other dogs that might reside in the home, and discussing/demonstrating the problem behavior in detail.

- 2) **Q: Not all shelter workers are created equal. How much of a shelter *worker's* attitude and behavior will affect a dog's response? How can we protect a dog from this?**

A: Attitude is everything!! Our behavior certainly affects dog behavior, and sometimes “buy in” to behavior programs by staff can certainly be a challenge. We’ve seen a change in their attitude when they see a dog’s behavior change due to behavior modification.

- 3) **Q: We have a lab/pit mix who doesn't get along with any other animals, and when he sees himself in a mirror he gets aggressive. How do you stop or redirect this aggression? He was an impound and we have no background info on him.**

A: Many dogs do that (bark or growl at themselves in mirrors). Background sometimes doesn't matter – we deal with what we are seeing at the moment. If we’ve decided that this dog is available for adoption from our shelter (sometimes we must transfer dog aggressive dogs to other organizations who are in less crowded communities), we first establish a relationship with the dog and teach the dog that WE are more fun and interesting than other dogs, so that we can teach the dog to pay attention to us instead of other animals.

- 4) **Q: Are the behavioral evaluation 11 subtests available from the Center for Shelter Dogs?**

A: Yes, please go to our website:

<http://www.centerforshelterdogs.org/Home/DogBehavior/MatchUpII.aspx>

5) Q: Have you found or placed any dogs to be trained as service or detection dogs?

A: Yes, not often, but when we do it is mostly detection dogs – dogs without serious problem behaviors and appear to almost have an ‘obsession’ with tennis balls.

6) Q: What could you do for a fearful dog who is scared in the kennel but not outside of their kennel?

A: We mostly use treat buckets inside the kennel; when strangers or anyone walks by they toss a delicious treat into the kennel. This is classical conditioning.

7) Q: How does your behavior modification differ or relate to the SAFER test?

A: We have a few more subtests than SAFER and have an online test that produces a report at the end. While neither SAFER nor Match-Up II have been validated (with results published in a peer-reviewed journal), both have some research to support them, and Match-Up II is currently in the process of being assessed for reliability and then validity.

8) Q: When you give points (via Match-Up II) for behavior history, are you taking into consideration that sometimes what people put on the surrender form is exaggerated or even untrue?

A: Yes, very much so. Sometimes things are inaccurate. When we are uncertain, we contact surrendering people to try to get as much information as possible. However, our intake staff are very experienced and good at determining when people are not trustworthy (in terms of the information they are providing), so we don’t have to do this very often.

9) Q: Is the shelter that you're talking about an open admission shelter?

A: The Animal Rescue League of Boston is a flexible admission shelter, which means that we find a place for emergencies if an animal has no place to go, but pets that are not emergencies are placed on a waiting list for admission to the shelter. The Center for Shelter Dogs is not a shelter facility; although we are a program of the Animal Rescue League of Boston and operate out of the Boston shelter.

10) Q: Do you have a small set of people who do the behavior evaluation paperwork? It seems very time consuming, and I'm not sure we have the staff to take that on, any suggestions?

A: Yes, we use the internet for behavioral evaluation paperwork; we have a portal that is web-based and helps tremendously time-wise. We fill out the paperwork as the evaluation progresses, which saves us a lot of time, but could be a problem if you don't have a fast or reliable internet connection.

11) Q: What do you do about liability insurance?

A: The shelter has a liability insurance policy that is monitored by our lawyers and senior management team.

12) Q: In your state, or nation-wide, would the shelter or rescue group ever be held liable for a dog they've adopted out that has a bite history?

A: Yes, there is always the potential that a shelter will be held liable for problems after adoption. We attempt to limit liability by being honest and clear about what we know about a pet, keeping very good and clear records, and also do our best to limit our liability with our adoption contracts, etc. And obviously, most importantly, we don't want dogs coming from our shelter ending up being a serious problem for adopters!

13) Q: As a team leader of dogs at a shelter, I do see that most of our dogs are house trained, but when there is only one person working with the dogs, should I feel bad by not taking them out all the time?

A: As people who care about animals, not getting the dogs out of their kennels is, of course, something we feel bad about. This is where volunteer programs can really help, to get the dogs out of their kennels for elimination, and to provide them with enrichment.

14) Q: Can't many of these problems be directly linked to how the owners treated the dog? Many owners expect perfection and spend little time with a pet. This could contribute to fear/aggression/mistrust on the dog's part wouldn't it?

A: Behavior is a product of genetics and environment. The environment that the dog lived in and how it was treated can certainly play a role in behavior. This is one of the few situations where surrender to a shelter is actually a good thing, when we have the ability to modify behavior and place the pet in a home that is more suitable for it. It's not always related to how the dog was treated; many other factors come into play such as the environment (busy city vs. quite rural area) and the composition of the household (small children present), etc.

15) Q: Our shelter can be very concerned about how long a behavior modification dog stays in the shelter. How long on average do your behavior modification programs last before the dogs are adopted?

A: We can usually put them up for adoption right away in unison with behavior modification, so we do our best not to hold them up; however our length of stay for dogs with problem behaviors is about 10 days longer than dogs without problem behavior.

16) Q: Does it take a while to find them that right home?

A: Oftentimes, yes, but we are committed to waiting for that special person who is the right match for a special dog. We want to find a home where the problem behavior is NOT a problem behavior for the new adopters...and sometimes that takes time. Good marketing programs for you shelter can certainly help!

17) Q. Do you see more aggression toward strangers when they pass quickly by the kennel and/or turn their backs?

A: Sometimes, yes. With that we will toss treats as the person is turning.

18) Q: When your dogs are undergoing behavior modification programs, are they off the adoption floor? How do you work around losing consistency from volunteers and other staff not addressing the same behavior modifications as the trainers are? For example, when caretakers move the dogs through the kennels while cleaning, they don't think they have time to walk the dogs, or to give treats and training.

A: We try our best to keep the dogs in adoption while undergoing behavior modification. If they are not in adoption, then we put them on the website as being available for adoption, and if people come in to see them we will allow them to meet the dog. If they can't be put up for adoption, we will work on behavior modification for a week then re-assess.

As far as staff and volunteers not having time, treat buckets are easy, take no time and see quick results. And we attempt to involve all of our staff and volunteers in BEHAVIOR, so they are motivated to help work with the dogs, and can see firsthand the positive results of behavior modification. We are certainly nowhere near perfect and have problems with consistency, but we live in the real world, and also recognize that in their new home, if there is more than one person in the house, they probably won't be consistent either. So we do the best we can.

19) Q: How many people work with these dogs each day? How long is each session?

A: Usually, just one person, rarely two, and occasionally some other staff members as well. Each session depends on how much time we have. Most sessions are 15 to 30 minutes; rarely the sessions are up to one hour. We keep sessions short to maintain motivation, and work with as many dogs as possible during the day.

20) Q: Do you have a protocol or a set of tests for dogs that you have identified as highly driven? Or, do you call a detection trainer to come down and test the dog?

A: Yes, we have people we can call, but we don't see these types of dogs very often at our shelter. Sometimes we call local law enforcement for direction and/or help with placing those dogs. Other times when we think the dog is "very driven", we get the dog out of the stressful shelter environment, and the dog is happy being a pet, and not a working dog!

21) Q: We tried treat buckets, but a lot of visitors who walk by don't pay attention, so then you get people walking by and the dog isn't getting that positive interaction.

A: We put signs up, and mention it to people, which helps. Plus our staff and volunteers use the treat buckets, so the dogs are already expecting to have treats given to them. Some people will use them, some won't...we do the best we can!

22) Q: Is it preferable for a very fearful dog to be kenneled alone or with a non-fearful dog?

A: If possible, we like to place them with a non-fearful dog, if they are both dog friendly. We would then take the dog out alone for behavior modification sessions.

23) Q: What do you suggest is the best way to get a dog out of the kennel when they're leash-biting?

A: Use treats and toys – give the dog something else to chew on while getting him or her out of the kennel. Sometimes a spoonful of peanut butter will work. A head halter can also really help to control the dog and move it out of the noisy kennels as quickly as possible. And because I've mentioned noise, working on teaching dogs to remain quiet while other dogs walk through the kennels can also help.

24) Q: How much does dog to dog aggression affect your decisions? And how do you manage the stress levels of dog aggressive dogs in your environment?

A: Dog to dog aggression affects our decisions; especially because we live in a busy city where it is difficult to avoid other dogs. We do our best to place these dogs, and do a good job. Many dogs with dog aggression learn to walk by other dogs calmly...these are dogs that don't want dog friends, don't want to go to dog parks, just want a life they can enjoy with people, and people ONLY, no dogs. We manage stress of dog aggressive dogs as best we can, and we are certainly not perfect. We provide them with other forms of enrichment...playing with them, time in offices, quiet time, food dispensing toys, etc.

