

How To Implement Behavior Evaluations By Letting The Dogs Tell Us Who They Are

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It has been my experience that most dogs brought into the shelter need a minimum of 4-5 days to adjust - sometimes a bit longer for owner surrenders perhaps even a week or more. Waiting a full week before implementing a behavior evaluation gives the dog the fairest chance to show who they are. So try your hardest to give them time to adjust before evaluating them.

During this adjustment period, the evaluator should be viewing them and casually passing by the dog's kennel saying "hi". You don't want to establish a personal relationship with the dog, as this will affect the behavior evaluation later. But the evaluator does want some safety information about the dog ahead of time. It's important to have an idea of how this dog feels about people (shy/ sharp/ aggressive) before the evaluator takes the dog out of the kennel to start the behavior evaluation. When I go to get the dog for evaluation, if I notice that the dog won't come forward in kennel I will ask the kennel staff how are they getting along with this dog. During the first few days if the dog is bold, forward & confident I might evaluate earlier if it's an owner give up. Once in a while I have someone else evaluate the dog because, for whatever reason, the dog just doesn't like me. *I want to give each dog a fair chance to show its best self.* The evaluator should not become overly friendly or silly during the behavior evaluation process. (No hugging, kissing and allowing the dog to cuddle with you on the couch until after you have finished.) This is extremely important. The evaluator should be impartial, but calmly friendly.

Barrier aggression: If the dog has been really barrier aggressive lets try to figure out why. Toss some food into the kennel to see if you can defuse the situation. Try having someone walk or run in the kennel hallways to see what happens. If the dog starts to bark & growl then you know you have a problem. Try some classical conditioning techniques to retrain this barrier aggression. Toss food into the kennels as each kennel person walks/runs by. Reinforce for sitting and being quiet. Until we know what triggers the behavior and if it stops with food distraction, we can't determine if it can be retrained.

Very fearful dogs: For really fearful dogs someone must befriend this dog till it can function in the shelter. Sometimes only a foster home will help this animal. These dogs need the most time to find their footing. For these animals we need to give them at least a month with the support of a human friend before you can behavior evaluate properly. Those who continue to growl and stay curled up for more than two weeks will probably not make it unless someone takes the time to help it. Ideally these dogs could become the project of a group of our volunteers specifically trained to desensitize fearful dogs. At UVHS this dog would be assigned to our Star Volunteers.

Fear Biters: Those who are biting out of fear are sick or hurt/sore and they need time to feel comfortable and become desensitized to whatever treatment they need. The hospital staff must avoid using force with these dogs unless their care is an emergency - a real life or death situation. The hospital staff should ask the kennel staff to help work with this animal till the dog can tolerate the medical care.

How to implement the Behavior Evaluation:

Walking the dog before testing. *This is one of the most important parts of the evaluation. It allows the dog to become comfortable with you (even though you are not going to become overly friendly just a*

slight pat on the head for saying Hi.) It also allows the dog able to relieve itself and get rid of some pent up energy

I walk the dog to give him a chance to pee and poop before evaluating. I usually use an 8-10 foot slip leash so the dog can move around enough to be who he/she is. If the dog really pulls badly, then I will put on a gentle leader. If at all possible, I'll allow the dog to play in one of our play cages if one is available. This way I can see some of his normal dog behaviors. Watching the dog out side for five minutes tells me a lot. I am watching for body posture while other people & dogs walk by. I want to see if I can get eye contact and of course I want to give the dog a chance to blow off some steam so the evaluation will be a fair snapshot of this dog. I'm watching for signs of sociability at all the times.

Bring the dog into the "Get-Acquainted Room": Next I bring the dog into our "Get-Acquainted Room". I observe what the dog does as soon as I take the leash off. (Note - if the dog is a bit tense I will not take the leash off yet.) While the dog is reacting to the room and what's in it, I will walk around and bump into the dog accidentally with no eye contact on my part. I would even say something like "I'm sorry" and touch it all over. And then I will go over and sit at the desk just watching and observing. I want to see if the dog:

- Is going to mark any thing in the room or check out the cat bubble, (if it shows severe attention to the cat bubble then I need to really watch this dog around cats)
- Finds the toys to play and play with any of them
- Is anti-social, or whiny
- Jumps up on the furniture and makes himself at home
- Goes to the door and wants to leave
- Decides to stay and interact with me

If the dog comes over to me to check in I will pet him. If I think petting will over stimulate him then I will just talk to him. I'm quiet, calm ("quiet hands, quiet mouth") - I'm just observing. I will try to have someone come into the room so I can watch to see what the dog will do. I am filling out the Behavior Evaluation form while the dog is loose in the room. I am keeping track of sociability and temperament of this individual dog - trying to let this dog's behavior tell me what type of home he would best fit into. I'm always looking for sociability and calmness - a dog that wants to please. If I find one that I think will make a great family dog I push this dog more. I will also make sure that the AC's (adoption councilors) will watch to make sure this dog wants to be around children. The dog must want to play with children and indeed even choose to be around them. The more tolerance a dog has the better chance of him being able to handle a busy active household.

After about 5 minutes I should be able to tell if the dog is social or independent. Though some might like having the dog on leash, I personally find that this inhibits the dogs greatly - so I don't get to see the dog's true personality. We are fortunate at the shelter to be able to do this behavior evaluation in the "Get Acquainted Room" if we do not do the evaluation in the G/A room we will lose the quaintness and hominess of the test. Our testing results would be different.

Engage the dog in some type of play: Now I try quietly to engage the dog in some kind of play. Again watching to see if the dog will interact or if it is too scared or just isn't interested. I try both tug and retrieving games. I drag a toy to see if the dog will follow, grab and then tug and I try rolling or tossing a toy to see if chasing and retrieving interests him. I'm looking for self control when playing. I am also looking to see if the dog wants to play cooperatively (with me) or by himself.

Checking for obedience skills: I will also take some food and see what the dog knows - sit, stay, down, rollover, shake-a-paw, etc. - the more skills the better. Does he need a treat or will he just comply when asked.

Settling: Now I watch to see how long it takes the dog to settle (lie down) either on the couch or on the floor. I will allow 5 minutes for this to happen.

Tolerance to touching: Next I call the dog to me for some touch testing. I push on the dog, try hugging, I even try pinching his flank but only if I think the dog can handle this. If the dog has been really good about this then I might push him a bit harder now - thinking it might have potential in a family with younger children.

Exchanging toys for food treat: I want to see if the dog is possessive with a toy or ball. If the dog starts to hover over the toy then I will see if I can exchange for a piece of food. I will make a note of dog's reaction.

Food bowl test: This is when I bring out the food bowl and test the dog's ability to tolerate having me near him with canned food in the dish. I also test his possessiveness with a rawhide chew. I never compete directly with the dog, nor do I tease by pushing on the dog's cheeks. I will just casually put the assess-a-hand on its back and stroke it twice, and then I will put the hand into the dish and move the dish around - watching the dog's body language. If at any time during this test the dog growls or snaps at the hand, then I will stop and start tossing food into the bowl and see if this makes a difference. Do the John Rodgeron game at this time as well. If the dog does not get better in a few days then I should be notified to reevaluate the dog. *Most dogs get better right away.*

Reaction to the unusual: This is when I open the umbrella. I'm looking for some type of startle behavior and then the dog investigating the umbrella. If the dog is fearful, I will toss some food on the umbrella and see if the dog can overcome its fear. If not, then I know that this dog will need lots of help. If the dog bites the umbrella then I need to be notified even if the rest of the test went well. At this point the person temperament testing should ask me (Dee) to come in and assess if we can help this dog. We need to decide if this dog just needs more time with volunteers helping out on a daily basis.

Noise sensitivity: During all of the evaluating, I have been observing if the dog startles at noises he hears. At some moment during the test as the dog is distracted from me, I will usually toss a metal bowl onto the floor. I'm looking for a startle behavior and then for the dog's ability to recover and want to check this out. If he won't come check it out I will toss food in and around the bowl to see if s/he can overcome his fear. If he does, then I will work on this and make note of it in the re-homing plan.

Stranger enters room: I have someone enter the room talking loudly and boldly, but as the dog approaches them the stranger becomes friendly and agreeable. If the dog is standoffish I will give the stranger some cookies to see if the dog will overcome its fear. If the dog can't overcome its fear, then I need to look for a foster home or get volunteers to work with him if I'm pretty sure he won't bite!

Now I can work on the Re-homing Plan. The behavior evaluation is a way to "see" what each dog hasn't learned. There are a few dogs that can't be helped, but most of our dogs with a targeted socialization/ self-control program can be successful in new homes. Our job in behavior evaluations is to learn what kind of home is best suited for each dog. AND what we need to do to help this dog be better prepared for adoption. If I'm really worried that the dog isn't ready to be put up on the adoption side but feel with time the dog will get better then I will write down and talk to everyone about what this dog's needs are. So together we can help this dog become the best s/he can be.

- ***Special consideration dogs: If any dog has exception retrieve/play drive I would like to know about it ASAP so I can evaluate it as a possible working dog.***

Definition of words used in behavior evaluation:

Unforgiving- vindictive, holds a grudge. If corrected isn't going to forgive easily. Could become a biter if bite inhibition isn't worked on. This dog may appear be either independent or submissive. When hurt or corrected this dog won't make eye contact, nor will it return to the human to ask why and to make up.

Independent - Doesn't need human support for company or entertainment. This dog finds exploring the environment more interesting than humans. Independence doesn't indicate any threat as a biter. Independent dogs require handlers who will supervise and manage this dog and be able to figure out what the dog will work for or the dog will be a wanderer and not come when called.

Confident- is secure in its surroundings and will habituate easily to most situations makes good eye contact. Looks, listens, analyzes new situations without worry.

Outgoing - "Hail fellow, well met" to person and dog. Wants to run up and greet everyone. Always seeking attention. These are the dogs that jump on everyone.

Submissive- wants to interact but solicits your approval by making its self-smaller and showing that it know that you are higher ranking. A submissive dog might be a confident worker, good at any job, but simply seeks human approval by showing submissive postures. Might submissive pee if you don't watch your body language. A dog with submissive behavior is not necessarily shy dog.

Bold - this dog will be in your face. Will jump to take toys or food from handler. Will see itself as an equal and will compete with humans for resources. You'll recognize these dogs by their hard eye contact with humans. Not afraid of anything ready, to take on the world - depending on the breed type this dog will probably be a handful. These dogs need handlers who understand the "no Free lunch" program. Could bite, but the easiest to teach bite inhibition to.

Shy - fear causes this dog to make no eye contact, avoids people and situations that are new, doesn't approach people easily. New = bad for these dogs.
Could be pushed to bite

Defensive -Immediately reacts with barking to any sounds or new people or events. Very reactive. This dog could become barrier aggressive easily. Could bite.

Assertive or pushy - describes adolescent, young rowdy (unmannered) dogs who have no self-control. This dog often hasn't been socialized so it doesn't read signals well from people or dogs.