



## The Use of Temperament Tests in an Animal Shelter or Rescue

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Animal shelters and rescues have been assessing dog and cat behavior for many years and the industry is filled with different “tests” to uncover the underlying personality of an animal. Unfortunately, there is much controversy regarding the reliability, validity, and the procedure of assessments in general. This article will work to clear up the controversy and provide much needed clarifications about the whole “testing” process.

### What is a temperament test?

First, let's look at proper terminology. I don't like the word “test” when speaking about evaluations. Test implies a grade and therefore a rigid pass / fail outcome. Using the word “temperament” is also a misnomer. We cannot actually assess a dog or cat's temperament alone. We are looking at many contributing factors. Let's go over some definitions:

Assessment: The evaluation or estimation of the nature, quality, or ability of someone or something.

Profiling: The analysis of a person or animal's psychological and behavior characteristics to assess or predict their capabilities and behavior.

Temperament: Emotional responses based on natural or innate responses to the environment. It is based upon genetics and experiences during early development.

Character – Behavior as influenced by our environment and experiences. Based upon learning history that is influenced by a changing environment.

Personality – Character and temperament combined. An overall way of responding to the environment.

Behavior – Actions at any given point in time.

The correct terminology is behavior assessment. Assessments evaluate a dog or cat's personality in an attempt to profile him or her.

### How are behavior assessments used?

Behavior assessments should be used to determine several things:

- 1) To measure/monitor an animal's stress.
- 2) To monitor health and medical issues or general well-being.
- 3) To determine the ability for the animal to be rehomed or adopted into a home.

- 4) To make decisions:
  - a) About the risks associated with the animal's behavior.
  - b) About compatible homes available for the animal.
  - c) About the animal's behavioral, social, and environmental needs.
  - d) About training and behavior protocols.

Behavior assessments help to uncover an animal's personality and behavior. For animal shelters and rescues behavior assessments are an invaluable tool as a guide for making decisions about the animal, protecting the public from harm, and determining the predictability of an animal's behavior in a new home.

### **What are a shelter or rescue's available resources?**

Behavior assessments help shelters to balance their "inventory" of animals with their resources. Every animal shelter and rescue has different resources available to them. Here are some examples of resources in a shelter or rescue environment:

- 1) General housing environment – kennels or foster homes.
- 2) Number of animals the shelter or rescue can accommodate in their program or facility.
- 3) Veterinary care and the ability to spend money on and provide care for medical issues.
- 4) The number of and training level of volunteers.
- 5) A shelter or rescue's customer (potential adopter) base and the demographics of potential adopters. This refers to the adopter's desire for certain breeds, ages, behavior, and sizes of animals.

As you can see by these few examples, every shelter or rescue will vary with regard to the available resources for animals. When possible, they should ONLY take on the animals for which they have the resources to accommodate and each of those factors must be considered. These types of animal shelters and rescues are referred to as limited-intake facilities or organizations. They may need to and are able to turn away animals based on space and resources.

Open intake animal facilities generally take all animals that are turned in, either by policy or by statutory mandate due to the health and safety of the public and other animals. (Stray and unwanted animals must have a place to go versus running on the streets.)

### **How should behavior assessments be used and who should conduct them?**

Let's breakdown "behavior assessments" first. There are formal behavior assessments which are a prescribed procedure for evaluating an animal's behavior. Formal behavior assessments require having trained evaluators in order to properly perform the behavior assessment. Then there are informal behavior assessments. Informal assessments occur when anyone interacts with and has experiences with an animal. Every person interacting with an animal has experiences. When these experiences are reported or shared with others this becomes another aspect of a behavior assessment.

Formal behavior assessments are an ancillary tool. The information gleaned from a formal behavior assessment should be added to information from other resources. This includes staff, volunteers, foster homes, veterinary staff, potential adopters, and owner relinquishment / surrender questionnaires. As you can see, behavior assessments are and should be ongoing throughout the entire time an animal is in a facility or organization.

### **What are the limitations of a behavior assessment?**

There are several limitations of behavior assessments. Some examples are listed below:

- 1) The severity and scope of behavior may be inhibited or exacerbated by the environment. Kennels can be a scary place for dogs and small cage enclosures can be scary for cats. New people and new environments in a foster home are also potentially scary for animals.
- 2) Stress may inhibit or exacerbate findings. All of these new experiences and environments can cause stress.
- 3) There may be extenuating circumstances such as an injury, illness, trauma, etc.
- 4) An animal's behavior may evolve and change some once a primary attachment bond is formed with an owner and/or a family in a secure home.
- 5) The evaluation area is limited in its scope for assessment scenarios.
- 6) It is not possible to determine the scope, threshold, or severity of an animal's aggressive response.

While behavior assessments are an incredibly valuable tool, there are a number of limitations that must be considered when creating "predictions" about an animal's behavior. Predictions should be fluid and not rigid or specific.

### **What do behavior assessments actually assess?**

Most formal behavior assessment procedures are modular, meaning they assess each aspect of a dog's behavior separately (e.g., the results of an assessment indicate that a dog has possession aggression, or handling sensitivities.) Often, these are pass / fail tests that are looking for safety as the number one consideration. Pass / fail tests have a place in the sheltering industry. If a shelter is full of difficult to place animals that have been housed for an extended period of time (i.e., more than a month in a kennel environment) then the shelter's entire animal population should be assessed in order to assess what available animals they have in comparison to the resources the organization has available. In these situations, it is essential to move the animals from the shelter perhaps by additional marketing efforts, social media postings, adoption events, foster homes, transfer to another organization with more compatible resources, or euthanasia when necessary.

The best assessments use an integrative procedure, as opposed to a modular procedure, that focuses on emerging patterns of behavior and their relation to an animal's defense mechanism, or how he or she handles conflict (e.g., the results of the assessment indicate that this dog becomes defensively aggressive when he is in conflict. The results of the assessment indicate that this cat becomes overstimulated and bites/scratches when she is in conflict.) Once we determine how the animal behaves when in conflict, we are

better able to predict behavior. Anything that causes conflict could or would likely elicit the response to some degree. The part that remains fluid is what would actually cause conflict for that animal. For some dogs, children cause conflict and with others they do not. With some cats petting causes conflict and with others it does not. (Pet Behavior Solutions developed this sort of integrative procedure called the "Core Behavior Assessment" in 2004.)

Most behaviors observed in an assessment are examples of an animal's defense mechanism. Assessments are not just about the individual behavior; they are about what that behavior represents and how else that might play out in a home environment. By looking at what these behaviors represent, you will be better able to make more appropriate decisions about the animals in the care of the shelter.

### **What does a behavior assessment tell us about a dog or cat?**

A behavior assessment gives us a glimpse inside an animal's personality. It is a method to reveal how a dog or cat deals with conflict, unveiling his defense or coping mechanism. This is similar to understanding human behavior. You never really know a person until you see how he or she behaves on a bad day. It is our coping mechanism that determines how we act when things are not going well. When we understand a dog's coping mechanism, we are better able to make recommendations as to that dog's adoptability (e.g., whether he is safe to place for adoption or if there should be restrictions on his placement).

Integrative behavior assessments are not based on pass / fail. Instead, they focus on an evolving balance of an animal's needs and an organization's resources. This means that outcomes are fluid. During times of year where adoptions are low, and intakes are high, a more stringent application of the assessment would be necessary in order to account for longer stays. This means that intake requirements should be stricter because some resources are fewer. Since the animals will be staying for a longer time, this will require more behavior and enrichment protocols which will further tax an organization's resources. When adoptions are up, and intakes are lower, a less stringent application of the assessment would be appropriate because animals are being placed in homes more quickly therefore there would be shorter stays. Resources will be taxed in other ways when adoptions are high (e.g., food, veterinary care, staff/volunteer time for adoptions, etc.).

Behavior assessments also uncover certain personality thresholds that are fairly static aspects of an animal's personality. We are able to uncover several behavior thresholds such as their fear, pain, frustration, anxiety, arousal, and aggression threshold. (i.e., how friendly and sociable the animal is, how fearful the animal is, how physically sensitive the animal is, how quickly the animal frustrates, how "worried" the animal is, how easily the animal overstimulates, and how long their fuse is before he or she may behave aggressively.) These aspects of an animal's personality are what make them unique and who they are. These thresholds are genetically established at birth and during early experiences which refer to the temperament of an animal. The "needles" on these behavior thresholds are then further impacted by an animal's character which include all of their experiences. These experiences can move the needle a little to the right or a little to the left, but they won't drastically move the needle to a completely different

location on the threshold scale. Experiences impact an animal through the filter of their genetic temperament. The nature and nurture argument should not be an argument. Both nature and nurture contribute to how an animal behaves.

### **Are behavior assessments fair?**

Yes, when conducted properly, behavior assessments are fair. The conflict the animal is placed in during an assessment is not outside the range of normal situations he may encounter in a home environment. Assessments are conducted in a relatively brief period of time and represent a "snapshot" of the animal's behavior. When conducted correctly, a pattern of behavior emerges that gives a good indication of responses to other situations not included in the evaluation. An animal's responses vary both in type and severity, and an assessment gives information about the type and severity of the reaction an adopter is likely to encounter when his or her pet is in conflict.

### **Summary:**

When properly conducted, formal behavior assessments are an invaluable, but limited tool. We must factor in all of the informal assessments that occur daily with people's experience with these animals. All available information should be considered in order to make the best recommendations for an animal.

In essence, behavior assessments are always about determining an animal's compatibility. Compatibility with a potential adopter and home, the environment in which the animal will be living, the pool of potential adopters for that animal, and the resources of the organization that is caring for and housing the animal.