BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT AND MODIFICATION: WHAT IS POSSIBLE, WHAT ISN'T

Volunteer Information Session

January 2020

Angela Schmorrow, CPDT-KA, KPA-CTP

Today's Agenda

- Background on Shelter Behavior Assessments
- Concerns/Limitations
- HSHV Assessment Process
- Behavior Modification
- Assessing Risk

Shelter Behavior Assessments

- Attempt to test aggression thresholds
- Determine appropriateness for adoption, necessary restrictions
- Number of battery-style standardized assessments developed
  - Assess-a-pet
  - SAFER
  - MATCH-UP II
- Attempting to look for contexts which may be triggers for aggression
  - Body handling
  - Resource guarding (food, toy, rawhide)
  - Response to other dogs, cats, children, etc.

Controversy Over Assessments

- Developed at a time when most animals in shelters would be euthanized.
- Decisions previous to this were made based on time limits, kennel behavior, etc.
- Worthwhile attempt to put animals up for adoption who were behaviorally sound.
- However, over time, their reliability has come under question.

Resource Guarding Study

- Mohan-Gibbons, et. al. 2012
- Found that dogs that exhibited guarding in a shelter did not necessarily guard in a home post-adoption.
- Some dogs who "passed" guarding assessment in shelter did exhibit guarding in home.
- Study did exclude most extreme cases.

Patronek Study

- Found that the most popular standardized assessments used in shelters were "no better than flipping a coin" at reliably predicting behavior in a home.
- "We suggest that instead of striving to bring out the worst in dogs in the stressful and transitional environment of a shelter and devoting scarce resources to inherently flawed formal evaluations that do not increase public safety, it may be far better for dogs, shelters, and communities if effort spent on frequently misleading testing was instead spent in maximizing opportunities to interact with dogs in normal and enjoyable ways that mirror what they are expected to do once adopted (e.g., walking, socializing with people, playgroups with other dogs, games, training). In conjunction with a thorough and objective intake history when available, these more natural types of assessment activities will help identify any additional dogs whose behavior may be of concern. Engaging in the normal repertoire of activities familiar to pet dogs has the additional benefit of enriching dogs' lives and minimizing the adverse effect of being relinquished and confined to a shelter, will be more indicative of the typical personality and behavior of dogs, and may help make dogs better candidates for adoption."

Why Is This?

- Context
- Trigger-stacking
- Assessor skill
- Types of Error
- Ethical considerations in measurement

Context

- Shelter behavior not necessarily reflective of behavior in the community.
  - Response to stress varies
  - Some dogs will behave better in the community
  - BUT, others will seem to behave better in the shelter
    - Suppressing behavior due to stress
    - Not put in context that elicits aggression while here (example, location guarding of furniture)

Trigger Stacking

- Stressors are cumulative
- Assessments tend to expose the dog to a number of stressful experiences one after another, increasing the likelihood that the dog will eventually respond with aggression

Types of Error

- False positives: Labeling a dog as aggressive who may not exhibit aggressive behavior in community.
- False negatives: Not identifying a dog as aggressive who will exhibit aggressive behavior in community.
- More invasive assessments will result in more false positives.
- Less invasive assessments will result in more false negatives.

Ethical Considerations

- To truly test reliability, we would assess, place dogs in community, then follow-up to see if they exhibit aggressive behavior.
- Problem: In order to not bias the test, this would mean even placing dogs that displayed high levels of aggressive behavior in the shelter.
- Removing these dogs in from the assessment will bias the reliability tests.

What Do We Do Instead?

- Gather info from all sources of information throughout a dog's entire stay.
- Current ASPCA statement on shelter assessment.

ASPCA Statement on Behavior Assessment

- "The ASPCA recommends that shelters gather as much information as possible to determine the behavioral profile of any dog in their facility that is being considered for adoption. . . The ASPCA acknowledges that (a) it is still unknown whether any particular source of information is more predictive of future behavior in a home than any other and (b) current scientific thinking on the usefulness of behavior assessments in predicting aggressive behavior is inconclusive. Behavior assessments have not proven highly accurate or precise when used to predict aggression after adoption. "

ASPCA Statement Cont.

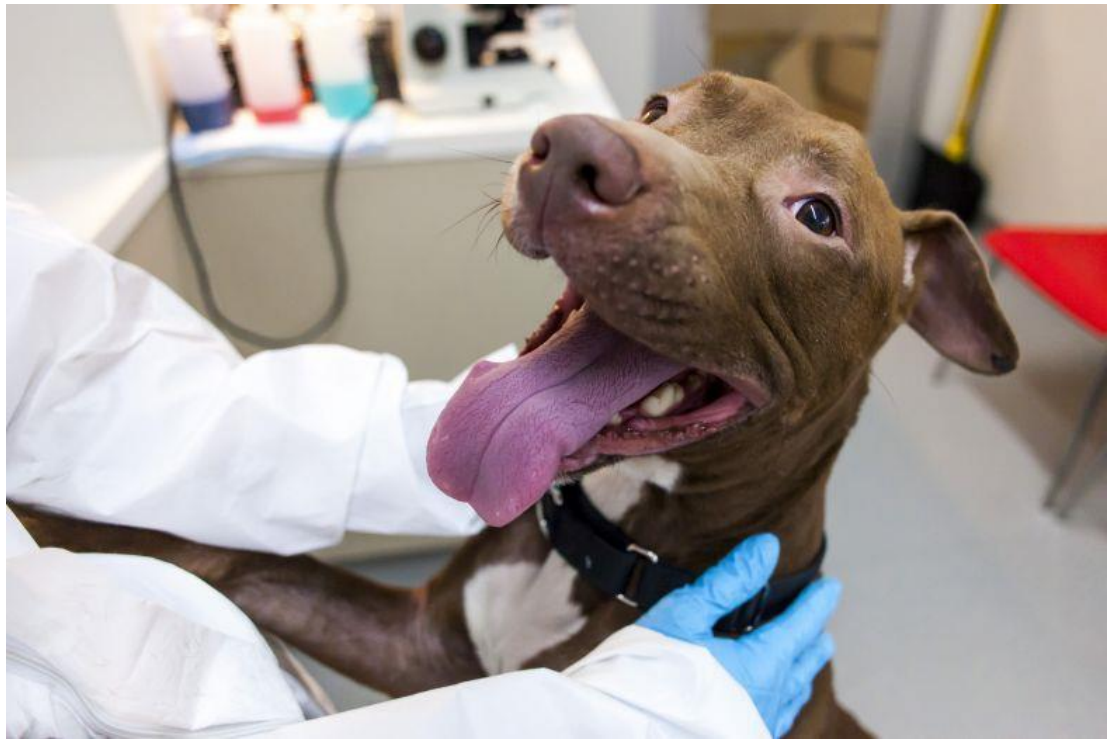
- Various sources of information, all with strengths and limitations:
  - Previous owner
  - Finder
  - Intake examination
  - Daily care staff and volunteer observations
  - Socialization sessions with people
  - Walks
  - Play groups
  - Foster homes
  - Standard assessment

Intake

- Best predictor of what a dog will be like in the community is . . . what they have been like in the community.
- Gather as much information as possible from whoever brings the dog in, whether owner, finder, officer, etc.

Animal Care Staff

- Share information about behavior throughout their interactions
  - Kennel behavior
  - Feeding
  - Walks
  - Exams/handling
- BOH, FOH, vet staff



Volunteers

- Walker logs, Behavior Alert Board, Staff communication
- You often are the ones spending the most time with the dogs and know them best!

Sources of Bias

- Truthfulness of owner/finder
- Staff/volunteers over-reporting of positive to "not get dog in trouble"
- Experience/skill of observer in reading and interpreting dog behavior and body language
- Effect of the environment, other stressors

Effective Communication

- Describe observable behaviors and body language – much more useful than speculations on what animal may or may not be thinking/feeling.
- Report the "good" and the "bad"
- Much easier to intervene early

Describe What You See

- https://youtu.be/RhUv1-ay3DA

CURRENT PROCESS

Behavior Assessment

- BOH staff keep initial behavior observation log
- Kennel behavior
  - Approach, entering, leashing
- Reactivity
  - In kennel, on walk, in room
  - Dogs, people, cars, environmental change
- Sociability and Handling
  - Soliciting attention?
  - Accepting of normal petting?
  - Arousal during play?
- Resource Guarding
  - Food, toy, rawhide
  - Tension noted during approach
  - BOH staff also note any guarding observed in kennel
- Dog Interaction

Video Examples

- Handling: https://youtu.be/UGg4ZaZRmrA

- Resource Guarding: https://youtu.be/BZ7-PKi2E30

Why don't we "cat test" dogs?

- Unreliable predictor
- Ethical considerations
- Adopters still need to be careful, do slow introductions, etc.
- Can make restrictions based on information from previous experiences in community or observed predatory behavior here.

MODIFYING BEHAVIOR

What Causes Behavior?

- Genetics
- Early development
- Learning history
- Current environment
- Some of these we can control/influence. Others we can't.
- From ASPCA Statement: "A dog's personality is formed by a complex interplay between his genetic predispositions, his developmental circumstances and his life experiences . . . a dog's behavior at any given time is heavily influenced by his emotional state, his stress level and the specific environment."

ABC's of Behavior

- Antecedent
- Behavior
- Consequence

- Antecedents create the conditions that trigger the behavior.
- Consequences will drive how likely behavior is to occur ("The cause that works backwards.")

Modifying Behavior

- We can change behavior by changing the environment or by changing the consequences.

Be Proactive – Manage the Environment

- Antecedent arrangements
- Arrange the environment so that desired behavior is likely, undesired behavior is unlikely.

Control the Consequences

- Behaviors that result in something the animal likes will happen more.
- Behaviors that result in something they dislike will reduce.
  - BUT . . .
    - Punishment always has fallout (fear, stress, avoidance, aggression).
    - Level of fallout is not necessarily correlated to what we consider the severity of the punishment.
    - Animals habituate to punishment, making it no longer effective.
    - Punishment is reactive – animal has already practiced the behavior.
    - Punishment doesn't tell the animal what to do instead. Frustration easily turns to aggression.
- Reinforcement builds behavior.
- Everything else is dangerous.

What Is Possible?

- Behavior is modifiable – we don't "fix," "correct," or "nip problems in the bud."
- A behavior that is learned and rehearsed can always come back.
- Examples:
  - Stick shifts
  - Sports
  - Names
  - Shelter examples (kennel doors, harnesses)
- The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.
- Abnormal behavior/brain functioning can limit ability to modify a behavior

Assessing Risk

- How predictable/manageable is it?
  - Can we identify the triggers?
  - Can they be avoided/managed?
  - How likely are they to occur? Extreme situations or everyday events?
- What does the animal do? How quick do they escalate?
  - Avoidance
  - Warning signs
  - Bite

Acquired Bite Inhibition (ABI)

- When the dog bites, how hard do they bite?
- Where on victim's body do they bite?
- Bite Scales
  - Ian Dunbar – dog to human
  - Cara Shannon – dog to dog
- Predictor of likely severity of future bites
- Not modifiable after a few weeks of age

Canine Bite Levels

Designed by Dr. Sophie Yin, Illustrated by Lili Chin*

Level 1 (Pre-Bite)

Snapping (air bite, no contact)

Get help before it progresses to an actual bite. Do not punish these warning signs or the dog may progress to biting without warning. Instead, learn the signs of fear and anxiety that the dog may show prior to this situation and the common human actions that might contribute.

Level 2 (Near-Bite)

Tooth contact on skin but no puncture

This near-bite is concerning even though it is inhibited and has not yet broken skin. Ask yourself what earlier signs (i.e. of fear/anxiety) you missed.

Level 3

3A. Skin punctures, single bite (all punctures shallower than the length of the canine tooth)

Even though the bite may not be severe it is still reportable. Reporting is mandatory if the victim is treated in a hospital. Once your dog has actually bitten at this level (or higher) he will always be considered a liability, even if, with behavior modification he is 99.9% improved.

3B. Skin punctures, multiple bites (all punctures shallower than the length of the canine tooth)

Multiple bites generally mean the dog is in a higher arousal state. The dog is reacting without thinking in between bites.

Level 4 (Very Serious)

Single bite with punctures deeper than the length of the canine (the dog bit and clamped down) or with slashes in both directions from the puncture (the dog bit and shook his head)

This is a harder bite than a level 3 bite. It's no longer inhibited. Therefore, it represents a much higher liability. This level bite can kill a child.

Level 5 (Very Serious)

Multiple-bite attack with deep punctures, or multiple attack incident

Dogs that bite at this level have generally had practice biting at levels 3 and 4 already. Some dogs are so fearful that a scary event triggers such a high arousal state that they get stuck in a reactive mode and continue to bite.

Level 6 (Death)

Victim killed or flesh consumed

It's important to realize that even little dogs and puppies can kill infants and small children and that death may be due to overly aroused play, rather than viciousness or fear. It's best to seek qualified help before the dog even reaches a level 2 bite.

*These levels are based on the levels developed by Dr. Ian Dunbar

©2012 Dr. Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

For additional Low Stress Handling information, posters, flyers, books, and DVDs, please visit our website at http://DrSophiaYin.com

CATTLEDOG PUBLISHING
drsophiayin.com
A VETERINARY CORPORATION

Questions@cattledogpublishing.com (530) 757-2383 — P.O. Box 4516, Davis, CA 95617 Support@lowstresshandling.com

Balancing Risk

- Dogs with even low likelihood triggers but poor bite inhibition can still be extremely dangerous.
- Dogs with high likelihood triggers, but good bite inhibition and warning signs may be able to do OK in the right environment.

Being Realistic

- What would the perfect home look like for a dog with an aggression history?
  - No men, no kids, no other animals . . . ANYWHERE.
  - DIY plumbing, electric, home repair, landscaping.
  - At least one owner is a veterinarian with advanced knowledge in behavior and training. Grooming ability may also be necessary.
  - Home in the middle of nowhere, privacy fencing, probably at least 8 feet high. Ample yard for exercise.

Being Realistic

- What should the owner be prepared for to be as safe as possible?
  - No visitors.
  - No delivery people.
  - No life changes (new partners, kids, ailing parents).
  - No travel.
  - No walks. Only leave house when necessary and muzzled.
  - Home and yard modifications.
  - Redundant management at all times.
  - Potentially thousands of dollars and many hours on veterinarians, medications, behavior experts.
  - Acquire college-level knowledge of behavior and intervention.
  - Physical ability to control dog.
  - Good health and home insurance.

Things Happen

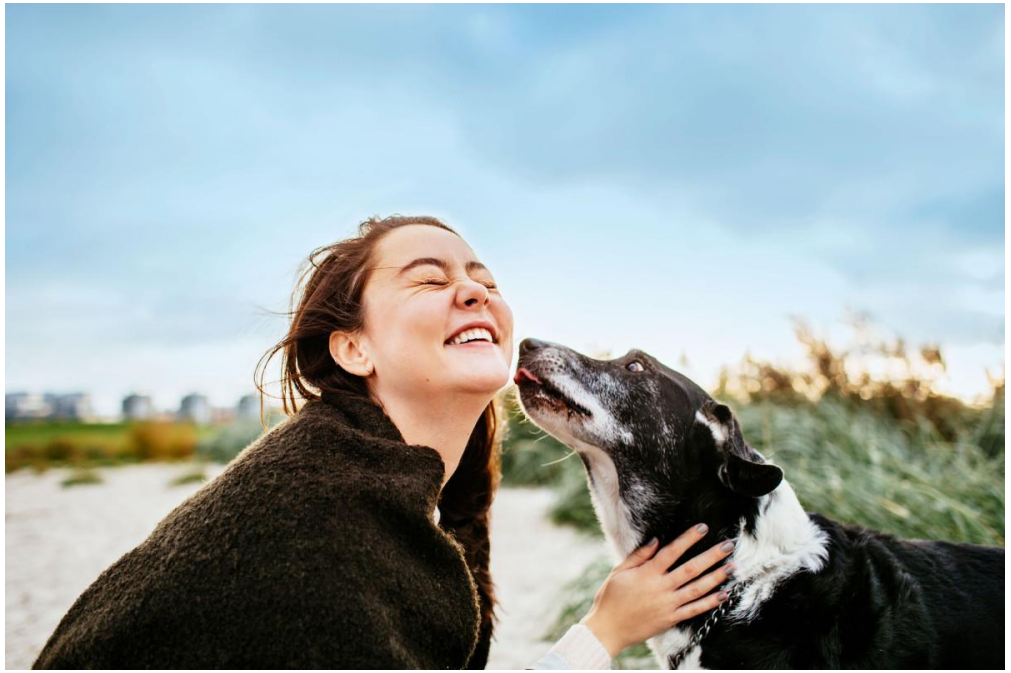
- Off-leash dogs, roaming animals.
- Unexpected guests.
- Owner injury/illness/hospitalization.
- Work-required travel or relocation.
- Relationship changes.
- First rule of management is: Management always fails.
  - Trees fall on fences, gates and doors blow open, leash clips fail, collars slip off, owners trip and fall, miscommunication happens

What Are the Possible Consequences?

- Human injury, possibly severe.
- Other animals injured or killed (possibly someone's beloved family pet).
- Lawsuits and legal involvement.
- Loss of homeowner's insurance.
- Likely euthanasia.
- Broken hearts.
- Owner who will never adopt from a shelter again.
- Responsibility to community.

Who Is the "Normal" Adopter?

- Wants a dog to walk, run, camp and cuddle with. Member of the family.
- Not looking to become a behavior expert.



“Trainer Projects”

- The reality is: Professionals and those who have been through this before are usually not looking for special project dogs.
- Know the risks, investment, and heartbreak.

Before Blaming

- It is totally OK to just want a nice family pet (and there are plenty of nice family pets needing homes).
- The average person is not an expert in dog behavior.
- Everyone makes mistakes.

Take-Aways

- Behavior assessment is imperfect science – the more information, the better.
- Modification is possible – total "fixes" are not realistic though.
- Have responsibility to the community and our adopters.
- The good news is that severe problems are rare, and most issues can be modified.

References

- ASPCA position statement: https://www.aspca.org/about-us/aspca-policy-and-position-statements/position-statement-shelter-dog-behavior-assessments
- Mohan-Gibbons, H.; Weiss, E.; Slater, M. Preliminary Investigation of Food Guarding Behavior in Shelter Dogs in the United States. *Animals* **2012**, *2*, 331-346.
- Patronek, Gary J., and Janis Bradley. "No better than flipping a coin: Reconsidering canine behavior evaluations in animal shelters." *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 15 (2016): 66-77.