



# Shelter

## research

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# Perceptions of Adoptability

By Anne Fawcett

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We're constantly told never to judge a book by its cover, but the fact is that we often make judgments (good and bad) about someone's personality from their physical appearance and behaviour – even if we meet them fleetingly. First impressions have a lasting effect on how we perceive others, which is bad news if we meet someone when they're having a terrible day.

Interestingly, researchers in the US have found that the same applies when we meet a dog for the first time. They found that potential adopters seek a dog that is approachable, friendly and intelligent without being dangerous or aggressive.

They set out to determine whether brief exposure to a dog behaving well or badly could influence our perception of **another dog** and ultimately affect that dog's suitability for adoption.

Psychology students were divided into two groups. Half were shown a 30 second clip of a German Shepherd Dog (GSD) behaving aggressively, the other half were shown a clip of a GSD behaving socially. They were then shown photographs of dogs (GSDs from both video clips, as well as a pointer, a bloodhound, and a collie) and asked to rate the dogs in terms of approachability, aggressiveness, dangerousness, intelligence, friendliness and adoptability.

The results confirmed that brief exposure to a misbehaving dog prior to making a decision to adopt may lead us to unfairly perceive other dogs in a similar light. Those who had seen the clip of the GSD behaving aggressively rated the GSDs in the photographs as significantly less adoptable than the other breeds. The study also found that people were more heavily influenced by negative behaviour than positive behaviour.

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# Strategies to boost successful re-homing

by Anne Fawcett

*A major goal of those working in animal shelters is to increase the rate of successful adoptions and minimise animal returns*

Strategies that work to improve the adoption process can be implemented across the board.

Successful strategies can be implemented as soon as an animal enters the shelter and continue until the time it leaves. The time spent in-shelter can be utilised to improve upon an animal's behaviour, making it a more attractive candidate for re-homing.

## Shelter Entry Strategies

### **Obtain a Detailed Behavioural History**

It's recommended that relinquishing owners fill out a questionnaire reporting on how frequently (if ever) their animal has displayed certain behaviours. Such behaviours might include aggression towards unfamiliar people, chewing on furniture when alone, sexual mounting or fear towards the vet.

Just as importantly, positive behaviours, such as the ability to sit and stay, should be detailed.

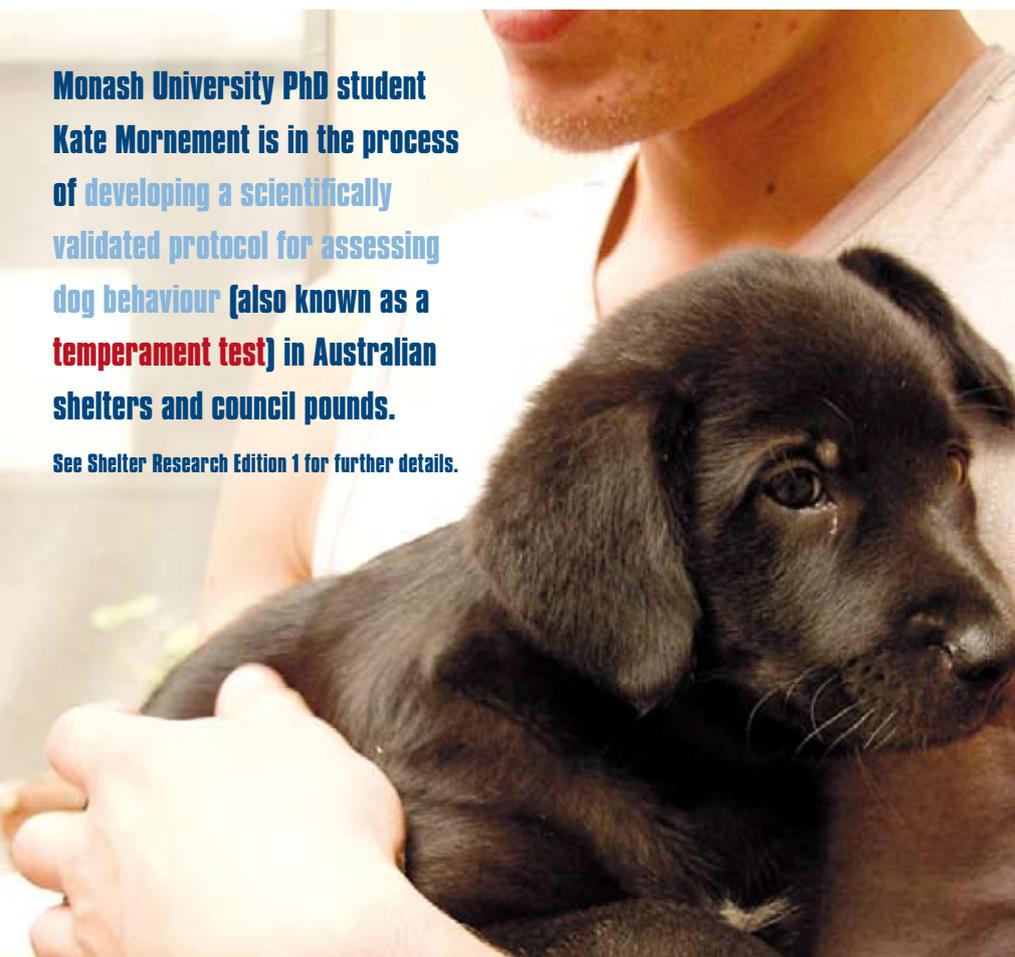
Most shelter staff will however, have encountered the odd owner they suspect of playing down an animal's behaviour problems to protect their dog from humane destruction. At the other end of the spectrum are those who may exaggerate or even fabricate these problems to justify the relinquishment of their animal.

### **Undertake Further In-Shelter Assessment**

To rule out any owner bias, animals should undergo further assessment in-shelter. A UK study (1) found that disparity between behavioural problems reported by the relinquishing owner and those reported by the new owner six weeks after adoption occurred.

**Monash University PhD student Kate Mornement is in the process of developing a scientifically validated protocol for assessing dog behaviour (also known as a temperament test) in Australian shelters and council pounds.**

See Shelter Research Edition 1 for further details.



For example, some dogs reported to exhibit anxious behaviour by their previous owner were not necessarily reported to be anxious by their new owner and vice versa. This suggests that some problem behaviours may be expressed only in a particular context or environment. It also suggests that while history from the owner is useful, it should be interpreted in light of shelter assessments.

### **Obtain a Detailed Medical History**

A detailed medical history can be extremely useful. This helps to avoid awkward situations, such as dogs with intermittent seizures being rehomed without the new owners being aware of the dog's condition. Intermittent medical problems may not be identified if the only medical history available is that from the time the animal has spent in the shelter.

## In-Shelter Strategies

Numerous studies have shown that time spent in a shelter environment can impact an

**It is estimated that approximately 10% of shelter euthanasias' are due to behavioural deterioration resulting in behaviours such as barking, hyper-reactivity and repetitive pacing. In some cases, such behaviours can be attributed to the shelter environment.**

animal's behaviour – positively and negatively. For example, in one study, dogs were perceived to become more relaxed around people (2).

Being able to address existing behavioural problems and minimise shelter-induced behavioural deterioration may increase adoption rates significantly.

### **Providing Environmental Enrichment and Training**

During the course of her PhD through Monash University, Dr Linda Marston found that providing environmental enrichment and training dogs increased rehoming rates by 25% – and reduced returns by the same degree.

There were also a number of other benefits.

Dogs involved in these programs were rehomed more rapidly, reducing the amount of time spent in the shelter environment. Because dogs behaved in a calm and quiet manner, visitors spent more time in the adoption area, helping a potential adopter forge a bond with that animal.

## Accurate Record Keeping

Recording details of when and where problem behaviours occur within the shelter may help build a more accurate animal behaviour profile. This can then facilitate the matching of an animal with the appropriate owners. These records, combined with the history from the relinquishing owner, can be used to rehabilitate animals in the shelter, provide new owners with advice and support, and match dogs with owners who are willing and able to manage these challenges.

## Increased Staff Morale

Another benefit associated with environmental enrichment is that, as both dogs and visitors were less stressed and had more time to enjoy one another's company, the morale of staff improved. The importance of staff morale in shelters cannot be overstated (see Shelter Research, 3rd Edition, 2007). Shelter workers who are less stressed are more likely to interact positively with animals, and may be less likely to take sick days or leave due to burnout.

In-shelter programs further utilise the extensive skills of shelter staff in modifying animal behaviour, challenging both the staff and animals in positive ways. Staff are able to play an active role in rehabilitating and rehoming dogs, a role which can be highly rewarding.

## Shelter Exit Strategies

### Matching Animal to Owner

Shelters increasingly recognise the role of "matching" an animal to the right owner thus reducing the chance of an animal being returned.

Different shelters employ different strategies. Some are informal and may be based on a casual interview with the potential adopter. In this scenario, the adopter may be asked about the qualities of their desired pet and their ability to deal with potential problems. A more formal matching program may involve the potential adopter filling out one or more questionnaires.

A number of welfare organisations have developed matching programs based on identifying the personality "type" of an animal and matching this with a similar "type" of owner. For example, an animal characterised as "active" will suit an "active" owner, whereas an animal characterised as "relatively inactive" may not.

### Establishing what the New Home Environment will be Like

Because environment plays such a large role in the expression of problem behaviours, it is important to question potential adopters about both the environment in which the animal will be kept and the nature of their daily routine.

Some shelters employ staff to conduct premises inspections before adoptions are signed off to ensure that the animal's future home is safe and conducive to wellbeing.

## Provision of Ongoing Support

Ongoing support may be offered in the form of telephone contact or home visits in the weeks following adoption to ensure that any behavioural problems are addressed, significantly reducing the rate of returns. It also means that if the owner needs to return the animal, they may feel more comfortable returning to the same shelter rather than relinquishing the dog to another shelter as is often the case.

**In her study, Dr Marston found that the return rate was often higher than shelters estimated as many owners returned an animal to a shelter different than the one they adopted from. Being able to determine the true return rate gives shelters a benchmark of adoption success which can be used to improve all aspects of the adoption process, from entry to exiting the shelter.**

**As almost three quarters of returns occurred within the first month of adoption, any efforts to strengthen the human-animal bond in this period may reduce returns. Dr Marston found that undertaking a post adoption training program helped address the challenges of the immediate post adoption period. Owners who participated reported feeling closer to their dogs.**

## References

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2. Wells D, Hepper PG (1992) The behaviour of dogs in a rescue shelter. *Animal Welfare* 1(3):171-186



## Perceptions of Adoptability

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The implication for animal shelters is that if potential adopters view misbehaving dogs before they view "good" dogs of the same or similar breed, they may be prejudiced against the "good" dogs. In other words their perceptions could be contaminated. If this is the case, exposing potential adopters to well-behaved, well socialised dogs when they enter the shelter environment may reduce this contamination effect, or even have a positive effect on adoption figures.

But there are several limitations with the study that should be considered. Firstly, the psychology students weren't actually adopting dogs, so they may not have put as much thought into their decision as someone who knew they would be taking a dog home. Secondly, the researchers only tested the impact of exposure to negative and positive behaviour of one breed. It may be that participants already had a negative perception of GSDs. It is possible that exposure to an aggressive pointer or collie may not have had the same effect on adoptability ratings.

Even so, it is clear that exposure to aggressive or antisocial behaviour can adversely influence our perception of an animal's suitability for adoption. It is therefore in the best interest of shelters to minimise these kinds of behaviour in potential adoptees to maximise rehoming rates. It may also be useful to restrict viewing of first-time dog owners to dogs displaying the most positive behaviour.

## Reference:

Wright JC, Smith A, Daniel K and Adkins K (2007) Dog breed stereotype and exposure to negative behaviour: effects on perceptions of adoptability. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 10(3):255-265

# Noise in dog kennels

By Anne Fawcett

Noise levels in animal shelters can be a headache for shelter staff and may be a nuisance for people living nearby – it can also deter potential adopters.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**One dog can produce a bark of 100 decibels – a level potentially damaging to human hearing. To put that in perspective, a jack hammer emits around 110 decibels, while a propeller aircraft produces around 120 decibels. Hearing protection is usually required when workplace sound levels exceed 90 decibels.**

If noise in the shelter environment is known to be damaging to our hearing, it's possible that it may also affect the hearing and welfare of dogs. After all, their hearing is much more sensitive than ours.

In one study (1), researchers in the UK measured sound levels in a range of kennel and shelter environments over 24 and 48 hour periods. They found that dogs in kennels are regularly exposed to high sound levels throughout the working day, and often well into the evening.

Not surprisingly, the main source of sound was barking. Barking tended to increase when staff arrived in the morning and decrease when lights were turned off in the evening. At one facility where dogs had free access to runs all night, barking tended to continue throughout the night. Barking also seemed to increase when staff carried out cleaning, and prior to feeding. Not surprisingly, barking did decrease temporarily while dogs were eating.

Other sources of noise included cleaning, particularly use of a high pressure hose, and external noise associated with nearby railway lines and traffic. These sources of noise tended to stimulate further episodes of barking.

In a US-based study (2), noise levels were found to be highest in areas within a shelter containing higher numbers of dogs – exactly what you'd expect. But investigators found that some visitors were so bothered by the noise that they left the holding area, reducing the time they spent with animals they might otherwise adopt.

This study also found that noise levels were greater in areas where dogs could see every other dog in the area from their own kennel door.

The impact of noise on dogs in these environments isn't fully understood, but may include damage to hearing, high blood sugar levels, heart disease, gastrointestinal upsets and effects on the immune system if studies in other species are any indication. Furthermore, high noise levels at night may interrupt the normal sleeping pattern of dogs, which may be stressful. Finally, there's the real possibility that noise deters potential adopters.

## So what can you do?

Listed here are a number of measures that can be taken to reduce barking. However, be aware that a number of them can negatively impact a dog's welfare i.e.: restricting access to outside runs, reducing the extent to which dog's see each other and limiting the number of times staff interact with dogs.

Before putting measures into place, weigh up the pros and cons and consider practical ways to address negative consequences.



## Eight ways to reduce shelter barking

1. Switch off lights to cut down night-time barking.
2. Restrict the number of dogs allowed access to outdoor runs at any one time. Ensure that adequate environmental enrichment measures are taken to counteract this restriction. (See Shelter Research, 2nd Edition, '07)
3. Sound-proof kennels - i.e. double glaze windows or install acoustic material in walls and ceilings to absorb sound.
4. If possible, relocate dogs (for example, to runs) while using cleaning procedures such as pressure-hosing. This both reduces the impact of sound on the dogs and may reduce a stimulus to bark.
5. Provide structured mental and physical stimulation. Well exercised dogs are more likely to rest and relax in cages.
6. Provide food puzzle toys to occupy the dogs. Barking can be reduced by feeding, so a chew toy can be a useful distraction.
7. Include dogs in an in-shelter training program (see Shelter Research, 1st Edition, 2007 for more details).
8. Manage the number of dogs within a particular environment, although determining the right numbers could take some work. While group housing of dogs can reduce barking by providing social enrichment, too many dogs may actually increase barking. Kennels with a full view of every other kennel in the area should probably be avoided.

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Kate with her dogs Archie and Charlie

## Editorial

Shelter Research is compiled by an editorial committee: Dr Pauleen Bennett (Monash University), Dr Linda Marston (Monash University), Kate Mornement (Monash University), Timothy Adams (Petcare Information and Advisory Service).

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

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