



Shelter

research

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Behavioural assessment of shelter dogs

By Kate Mornement



Many shelters and pounds struggle with the concept of behavioural assessment or temperament testing. Some do it, some don't. Some do a pretty good job and are happy with the outcomes while others are not so happy. What behaviours should be assessed? How long should assessment take? What constitutes a pass or a fail? These are some of the questions which I hope will be answered by my research.

Currently there is no scientifically validated behavioural assessment protocol (or temperament test) specifically designed for Australian shelters and council pounds to assess the dogs in their care for adoption suitability.

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My research aims to review current assessment protocols used both in Australia and overseas and then to develop and validate a protocol which will be made available for shelters and pounds to use. The review involves travelling to numerous shelters and pounds across Australia to record their current assessments and to interview the assessment staff. Staff are asked the pros and cons of the assessment protocol they use, what improvements, if any, they would make to the protocol, how confident they are that the protocol provides an accurate assessment and how much experience they have had assessing shelter dogs.

Once the review is completed, I will be holding several focus groups with experts on canine behaviour, such as dog trainers, breeders, behaviourists, shelter staff and veterinarians. An assessment protocol will be developed (based on the outcomes of the review and focus group sessions) and then validated.

If you would like to take part in this research, or if you would like to know more, please feel free to contact me:

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Innovative Australian Shelter Dog Program dramatically increases rehoming and reduces returns

All shelters face the multiple challenges of safely rehoming as many dogs as possible, without increasing the numbers of dogs returned to them and they have to achieve this with very limited resources. However, there is another challenge that shelters have to face and that is maintaining dogs' psychological health and well-being in a difficult environment. Maintaining psychological well-being is critical in preventing dogs becoming hyper-reactive and un-adoptable. Approximately 10% of shelter euthanasia is the result of such deterioration, therefore maintaining a dog's health reduces the risk of euthanasia.



The implementation of an innovative and integrated set of low cost strategies has resulted in a dramatic and positive change in one shelters' statistics. Rehoming increased by approximately 25% and returns were reduced to less than a quarter of what they were before the changes. The net result being that **93% of rehomeable** dogs were successfully rehomed, compared to 62% before the programs. Dogs were also rehomed more quickly and fewer died because they could not cope with shelter life.

This paper outlines these strategies.

During the course of her PhD, Linda Marston from Monash University looked at ways of improving the success of shelter dog adoptions. Initially, this involved tracking 21,000 Melbourne shelter dogs, to identify why dogs are admitted to a shelter and what happened to them once there. This identified the existing conditions and enabled the evaluation of changes to be made as they were progressively introduced during 2003 - 2004. Tracking adoptions by microchip number also enabled the most accurate indication of return rate to be made to date. Interestingly, returns occurred far more often than shelters had estimated. This was primarily due to owners returning an adopted dog to a different shelter, or not seeking a refund when they return their dog by declaring that they had recently purchased him or her.

Unfortunately, staying in a shelter has some adverse effects on a dog, which can affect his or her behaviour. Behavioural deterioration includes increased barking, reactivity and stereotypes. These behaviours are indicative

of stress, therefore staff were taught ways of reducing this stress using massage and 'time outs'. Changes were also made to the physical environment, such as reducing the number of dogs passing occupied kennels and utilising head halters and flat collars instead of check chains. All staff and volunteers were trained to use simple reward-based techniques to reinforce certain desirable basic behaviours and staff were taught to use a standardised behavioural assessment.



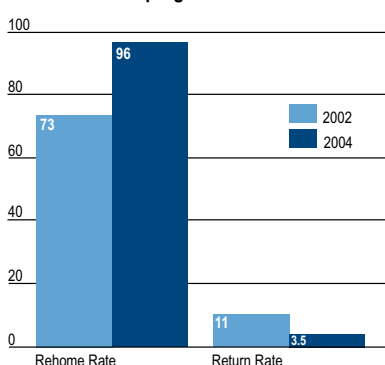
Environmental enrichment was introduced in a variety of forms, ranging from in-run entertainment, training, and exercise in a specially constructed 3-D activity area. This area was constructed from donations and provides training opportunities for the dogs as well as an opportunity to have a break from the stress of the runs.

Part of the research identified the key factors that influence an adopter when choosing a dog. The behaviour of a dog is the paramount factor affecting selection. Importantly, all of the key factors identified are easily trainable and not surprisingly, teaching dogs to behave in such a way as to appeal to a new owner increased the adoption rate.

The picture below shows what the public now see when they visit AAT. Quiet, calm dogs who gaze expectantly at them and greet everyone who approaches them in a calm and friendly manner. Because the dogs are more appealing, people spend longer interacting with them, which provides 'free' environmental enrichment for the dogs and an opportunity to generalize their training to many people.



fig.1 Comparison of Rehome and Return rates before and after program



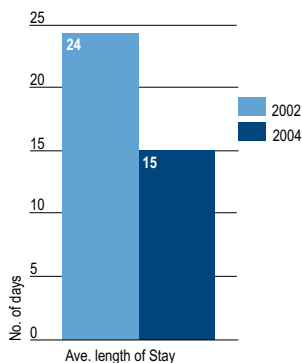
Identifying problem behaviour enables in-shelter behavioural interventions to be targeted using simple, safe, effective, and humane behavioural training. These techniques were taught to staff and selected volunteers in several short sessions. These individuals began training the 'behaviorally challenged' dogs to remedy issues which had previously prevented many dogs being rehomed. Not all behaviours are modifiable, or safe for staff to work with, but staff could confidently identify which conditions



were amenable to rehabilitation and what resources were available to use. Even though the shelter was rehoming dogs that previously would have been considered liabilities, **the return rate fell significantly**. These dogs responded well to rehabilitation training. Initially, there was some concern that these behavioural issues might re-emerge post-adoption, when the dog was being handled by less skilled dog-handlers. But a follow-up of a group of these dogs established that this was an unfounded concern. The problems did not resurface.

As can be seen from Figure 2 dogs were rehomed much more quickly after implementing the program. Knowing the animal better through using a standardised behavioural test also enabled staff to have confidence in test results. Having an objective test enables staff to match dogs more effectively with new owners, design and measure the success of remedial strategies for individual dogs and reduce the likelihood of post-adoptive problems eventuating.

fig.2
Comparison of the days in shelter before and after program introduction



Importantly, these increases in adoption rate were not due to euthanasing more dogs and only attempting to rehome the easy ones. On the contrary many dogs that might have been considered borderline were rehabilitated and timid dogs were provided with an atmosphere in which they could flourish and show their true natures.

NB: This shelter is on the outskirts of Melbourne and therefore the average stay is longer than for many inner metropolitan shelters



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There were a couple of unexpected, although very positive side-effects of the changes that were after all, aimed primarily at improving dog welfare. Because the dogs were less stressed and barked much less, the shelter became a nicer place for the public to visit and they moved more slowly through the facility, spending more time looking at the dogs. There were also substantial improvements in staff morale, which resulted in reduced staff turnover and fewer sick days. Jo Boland (manager of the Animal Aid Trust) states that

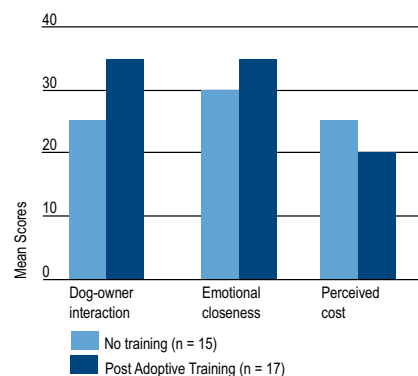
'I've had less staff burnout and turnover since implementing the changes. I believe this is due to our improved morale. Now the dogs have the best quality of life during their stay and we are proud that they often leave here in better shape than when they arrived. It is much nicer coming to work each day.'

As staff increased their ability to read dogs and deal with behavioural issues, this enabled the shelter to provide pre-relinquishment telephone advice to owners. This has resulted in many of these owners retaining their pets. Also the shelter provided the Post-Adoptive Training (PAT) program. This program was based upon research, and is designed to specifically address the initial post-adoption period, targeting common problems and promoting the rapid development of the human-dog bond. Establishing this bond enhances the owner experience of this initial period and reduces the risk of return. Figure 3 shows how recipients of this program interacted more with their dogs, felt closer to them and perceived fewer negatives attached

to adopting their dog than did a Control group, who were not exposed to such a program. About a quarter of the adopters each month choose to undertake the PAT program and a third of these continue with further training. This allowed the shelter to develop a new income stream.

The modular nature of the program means implementation can be incremental and that all shelters can implement some or all of these strategies to improve the welfare of their charges, depending upon resources available. For more information please contact Linda at linda.marston@med.monash.edu.au

fig.3
Comparison of owner relationship with and without post-adoptive training (measures use Monash Dog Owner Relationship scale)



Shelter hints & tips

Did you know that potential adopters prefer dogs that have toys in their run (Wells & Hepper, 1992; 2000) Even if the dogs don't actually play with the toys, the public not only prefer to see animals with toys but also adopt more dogs when toys are present. The public perceive the presence of toys as indicating that the dogs behave in a socially acceptable manner. Toys used in this manner must be easily disinfected or disposable to prevent them from acting to increase the risk of infection. Dogs prefer chew toys, such as Nylabones, over many other options (Wells, 2004) but toys need to be rotated regularly to prevent dogs becoming bored with them.

From the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of Shelter Research, produced by Monash University's Anthrozoology Research Group (ARG), together with Petcare Information & Advisory Service (PIAS).



Kate with her dogs Archie and Charlie

The aim of this newsletter is simple; to provide Australian animal shelters and council pounds with access to research findings and information directly relevant to the tasks of improving the welfare of cats and dogs in their care and reducing the number of animals euthanased each year.

Founded in 2000, Monash University's Anthrozoology Research Group (ARG), is a leader in the field of human-animal relationships, its members having published many articles in prominent scientific journals. Under the leadership of Dr Pauleen Bennett, our team of research staff and postgraduate students conduct world class research in areas such as animal welfare and behaviour, and the human-animal bond. Members of the group have a diverse range of backgrounds including animal behaviour, psychology, veterinary science and zoology.

ARG members have worked with animal shelters on several research projects in an effort to improve successful adoptions and reduce rates of euthanasia. While we are continuing this work, we realize that our scientific results are sometimes difficult for shelter staff to access. We therefore decided to produce this innovative newsletter to inform Australian shelters about what we and other scientists throughout the world have found.

Each issue of Shelter Research will focus on a particular theme. This issue looks at programs that can help increase successful adoptions. Our next issue will look at environmental enrichment for dogs.

If you have a suggestion for a theme, a success story you would like to share or you would like to talk about a particular issue you have, we would love to hear from you.

I can be contacted via email at:
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Kate Mornement has a Bachelor of Science degree with honours in zoology and a background in animal behaviour. She is currently completing a PhD in canine behaviour at Monash University in Melbourne.

Current research conducted by members of the Anthrozoology Research Group (ARG)

Lots of people who love animals, including shelter staff, contact the ARG to see if they can undertake further study in this area. While we don't offer undergraduate courses at the moment, we are always looking for enthusiastic, animal-loving postgraduate students. Below are some of the questions currently being answered by members of the group. Not all of these are directly relevant to shelters, however they are all concerned with improving some aspect of human-companion animal relationships.

What factors affect the successful adoption of dogs from animal shelters? Does environment enrichment have a positive affect on kennelled dogs? What is the best way to assess a dog for adoption suitability? What factors affect a puppy's chances of successful rearing to adulthood within a domestic setting? Can we measure personality in cats and dogs? Why don't more dog owners attend dog training classes? Why are some dogs obese to the point that their health suffers? These important questions are currently being investigated by members of the ARG.

Dr Linda Marston has recently completed her PhD looking at factors that affect successful adoption of dogs from animal shelters. She found that almost three-quarters of returns occurred in the first month post-adoption, but critically it was not the presence of dog behaviour problems that determined returns, as expected from existing research, but rather the relationship (or lack of it) that had formed between owner and dog. She then devised a training program for new adopters that incorporated this and strategies targeting the most common problems experienced. Owners who undertook this program interacted far more with their dogs and reported feeling emotionally closer to them compared with owners who had not undertaken such training. These benefits were also accompanied by a reduction in the return rate. Linda has recently started to duplicate the initial stages of this work with shelter cats.

Dr Jacqui Ley, a veterinary behaviourist and PhD student is looking at the best way to measure personality in dogs. So far, Dr Ley has found that the personality of dogs consists of five dimensions. These dimensions interact to form the personality of the individual dog. The dimensions are: extraversion, a measure of how energetic and outgoing the dog is; neuroticism, how fearful, anxious and cautious the dog is; training focus, how easily the dog learns and also how intelligent it is; self assuredness/motivation, a measure of how well the dog will concentrate on a task and; amicability, which describes how the dog gets along with other individuals of any species.

Michele Silva-Cummin is a psychologist and is currently undertaking her PhD. Her project is a study of the factors that are conducive to the adoption of a puppy and its successful rearing to adulthood within a human domestic environment. This study aims to identify and analyze the many factors that result in a successful adoption, which is defined by the puppy being reared to adulthood by its original owner.

Mia Cobb, Training Kennels Manager, at Guide Dogs Victoria joined the ARG early this year as a Masters student. Mia's project is investigating behavioural and physiological effects of introducing a structured enrichment program into a kennelled population of domestic dogs.

Vanessa Rohlf is undertaking her PhD looking at pet owner factors which influence dog obesity. Obesity is one of the most common nutritional disorders in dogs in developed nations and is one of the leading causes of health and welfare problems. Research has indicated that obesity affects up to 40% of dogs. While obesity can, theoretically, be effectively treated by shifting the balance between energy intake and expenditure, owner compliance with veterinary advice is generally poor. Vanessa intends to find what factors contribute to companion dog obesity and then to develop interventions to prevent and treat the disorder.

Another PhD student, Kate Mornement, is developing a scientifically validated and standardised behavioural assessment protocol for shelter dogs. Her research is featured in this issue.

The ARG recently surveyed dog owners attending obedience training with their dogs to find out their reasons for attending, their expectations prior to training, their training experience and the factors contributing to their satisfaction with these experiences. While the dogs behaviour was found to be unimportant in deciding to commence training, features identified as important included the characteristics of the instructors and school, opportunities to develop skills and knowledge and specific canine behaviour outcomes. Satisfaction was found to be multi-dimensional and influenced by a wide range of diverse factors which training schools will need to address in order to engage more dog owners in training activities.

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www.animalwelfare.net.au/arg