

# Improving the Re-homing Success of Shelter Dogs: A Brief Guide

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## Introduction

Various studies have shown that dogs exhibiting poor behaviour(s) are less likely to find new homes in an animal shelter/pound environment. Expression of behaviours such as aggression and excessive barking makes them significantly less attractive as pets (Marston & Bennett, 2003; Diesel *et al.*, 2008a; Kim *et al.*, 2009). Current research into shelter management has seen improvements in successful rehoming of dogs. The studies aimed to identify management practices that cause or exacerbate negative behaviours in the kennel environment. The factors examined include the effects of regular human interaction, basic training and the development of behavioural assessment capabilities by shelter staff (Diesel *et al.*, 2008b; Luescher & Medlock, 2009; Normando *et al.*, 2009). This guide will evaluate these methods in detail, and describe how effective management practices are improving the welfare of shelter dogs by maximising rehoming success and reducing rates of euthanasia.

## Discussion

Normando *et al.* (2009) aimed to identify whether regularly walked dogs were more likely to be rehomed by a rescue shelter in Italy. Termed an enhanced human interaction program (EHIP), the study lasted 36 days and involved two treatment groups. In one, dogs were walked weekly (9 dogs); in the other, dogs were not walked, but remained in their cages (13 dogs). Various dog behaviours were used as a “measure of attraction” for potential pet owners, including tail-wagging, time spent out of sight, and time spent at the front of the holding kennel.

The study showed walked dogs exhibited more positive behaviours than caged dogs. Diesel *et al.* (2008a) suggested that obedient and friendly dogs are more likely to be adopted. This suggests that the improved behaviour of walked dogs in the EHIP study may improve their chances. However, the study did not evaluate adoption rates of the two dog groups following the study, but instead postulated that positive behaviour indicated improved adoption success. Additionally, no post-adoption evaluation was conducted to examine the effects of treatment long-term.

Luescher & Medlock (2009) examined the impacts of training and desensitisation of shelter dogs on adoption rates at the “Almost Home Humane Society” in the United States. The study, involving two groups, employed basic obedience training. Dogs in the “trained” group (87 dogs) were trained once daily for 20 minutes over an 8-week period, during which they were desensitised to wearing a head halter, taught to come forward in the cage when approached, walk on a leash, sit on command, and not jump up on trainers. Dogs in the “control” group (85 dogs) received no training.

This study showed that more “trained” dogs found homes than those in the untrained “control” group, demonstrating that basic training and desensitisation of shelter dogs increased their adoptability. Luescher (2008) suggested that training and desensitisation to head halters minimises aggression-related behaviour, making dogs more manageable. This finding agrees with the current study, which aimed to increase the expression of positive dog behaviour to improve adoption rates. However, as with the Normando *et al.* (2009) study, there was no further examination of the long-term effects of treatment following adoption.

Diesel *et al.* (2008b) aimed to evaluate and compare the ability of shelter staff to assess the behavioural responses of dogs kept at the “Dogs Trust” welfare charity in England. Each staff member watched videos of 20 dogs, filmed within the shelter in a variety of situations. They were required to identify behavioural responses of dogs to people approaching them, and to

general handling and grooming. Staff were grouped as “experienced” (17 staff) and “inexperienced” (23 staff), based on their level of experience working with animals.

The results show considerable variability among staff members in assessing dog behaviour. Experienced staff members were more likely to correctly identify the meaning of behaviours exhibited by the dogs. Van Der Borg *et al.* (1991) suggested that behavioural testing of dogs improves their adoption success, provided it is carried out by experienced staff. These staff members are more likely to identify true negative/positive behaviours, hence improve the matching of dogs with a suitable owner. In this study, however, no measure of adoption rate was assessed.

Future studies may benefit from the model provided by Wells & Hepper (2000). During this study, surveys were sent out to owners of newly adopted shelter dogs to ascertain any observed alteration in dog behaviour by the new owner(s). The study gathered 37% of 1547 mailed surveys. These surveys identified that many dogs were placed in inappropriate homes, given that many were later returned for behavioural problems. For shelter practices these statistics would be invaluable. They would enable management procedures to be implemented that reduce the likelihood of unsuccessful adoptions. Additionally, the survey method would undoubtedly be cost-effective, and eliminate the privacy issues and logistics that would accompany attempts to evaluate the long-term effects of various management practices/factors in the post-adoption home directly. However, this method had its downside, given that results would mostly be based on owner opinion, rather than direct observation from trained and experienced behavioural staff/scientists.

Further to this, Marston & Bennett (2003) suggest that providing the new owner(s) with support in the form of obedience training in the first month following adoption improves the pet-owner bond. This increases the likelihood of learned, positive behaviour being continued in each dog's new home. As such, the implementation of training classes for newly adopted dogs should be considered in current kennel practices. This would improve the capacity of trained shelter staff to successfully place dogs in suitable homes by allowing the owner to adjust to their new pet, while observing and minimising unwanted behaviour during class.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, each of these studies has contributed significant results that could improve the welfare of shelter dogs. However, further evaluation is required into EHIP, basic dog training, and staff behavioural assessment training, which includes both adoption rates and post-adoption evaluations. This will enable better insight into the long-term success of each method by evaluating the behavioural progress of adopted dogs in their new homes over a prolonged period. For current shelter protocols, all of these methods should be combined to ensure more successful adoptions are achieved, and euthanasia rates are subsequently reduced.

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