

Benefits and limitations of canine behavioural assessments: part one

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JENNIFER DOBSON describes why assessing a dog's behaviour is necessary for reasons such as suitability for a variety of work and to gather forensic evidence

Summary

There are several reasons for conducting behavioural assessments, ranging from forensic purposes, rehoming considerations or work suitability, but assessments can only prove positives, not negatives. Aggression is an area of particular concern with dogs and safety considerations should be addressed. Practical, physical, legal or time limitations may apply. Seeing a dog in its home environment with its owner usually gives the fullest picture of the dog's behaviour. Behaviour is a response to stimuli, so the precise qualities of any stimuli experienced will affect the outcome, with owner presence and handler attitude often significant influences. Puppy tests can reduce wasted training cost of working dogs when combined with selective breeding. Weight and physical fitness can also affect behaviour. Assessment results need expert interpretation by an experienced, knowledgeable behaviourist, but it is impossible to assess and predict behaviour in every situation, because animals, and the humans they encounter and interact with, can all be highly unpredictable. Any report relating to a behavioural assessment should always carry the caveat that those were the results under the terms, circumstances and conditions in place at the time of the assessment being performed, and continued good behaviour cannot be guaranteed – as is the case with human parole assessments.

Key words

dog, behaviourist, assessment, stimuli, report

VARIOUS reasons mean it can be helpful to conduct a reliable behavioural assessment of a dog, ranging from forensic purposes, rehoming, work suitability or issues around children and so on.

The aim or end purpose of the assessment will affect the precise indicators looked for, and the style of the assessment, including if it is relative to other dogs or specifically about that dog.

One problem is that you cannot prove a negative. You can prove something could happen, but you cannot prove it never would. A dog can be confirmed as having been friendly, or not friendly, in certain circumstances. It can be assumed no dog would be aggressive in all circumstances as this would be incompatible with life, but it cannot be assumed a dog will be friendly in all circumstances, at all times, just because it is so under certain conditions, at certain times.

Applications for assessments

When assessing dogs for rehoming, the main questions concern whether the dog is suitable to be rehomed and, if so, what type of home and owners would be its best fit. Is it sociable with cats ([Figure 1](#)), other dogs and children? Is it a dog requiring an experienced owner, familiar with any breed-typical traits? Is it a dog with any particular behaviour needs, such as not being comfortable if left alone, and so on?

Dogs may be assessed for their suitability as therapy or assistance dogs – for example, guide dogs, hearing and wheelchair user assistance dogs or epilepsy detection.

Most assessments for assistance dogs include looking for those more interested in their handler/owner than in other distractions, and that show interest and aptitude for the proposed job while being easily motivated – often by food or toys.

Dogs may need to be assessed before placing children for adoption or foster care, where behaviour towards children is obviously a major consideration. However, a complication is that behaviour can change, for better or worse, through learned experience, and depending on the ongoing behaviour of others the dog lives with or encounters. Since this is a potential circumstance that can change over time – unless indicators were present at the time of the assessment – it may not be predictable.

Within a behavioural consultation, assessment may be required to judge risk, to evaluate prognosis and to design an appropriate behavioural modification programme.

Assessing canine behaviour can be for forensic reasons, such as testing evidence for whether a dog appears to have been attack-trained, or to reliably behave as described in evidence? Does it

show an inclination to chase livestock? Behavioural assessments can also be required to assess dogs for suitability for control orders (and to establish what the terms of such orders should be), contingent destruction orders or destruction orders.

There may often be practical, time or physical restrictions applying. In terms of time restraints, even when fostering a dog to assess for rehoming, there can be a honeymoon period of a few days to a few months before the dog's "true" personality may be fully revealed. But even that will depend on the situations it encounters and the impressions the dog acquires of its new surroundings in the meantime, including the personalities of other individuals within that environment

Aggression

Aggression, in its various forms, is often the area of most concern in many behavioural assessments as it usually carries the most risk. Safety and welfare, plus legal, ethical and financial liabilities, are most likely to be the primary concerns.

Among other situations this would encompass a dog that is the subject of criminal or civil court proceedings related to injuries or damages. Assessments of dogs for the courts are very much about assessing any direct or indirect risk to the public, other dogs and animals. Conversely, in a dog intended for Schutzhund training, or some form of security work – where the potential for controlled aggression, and to notice and react to anything out of the ordinary, becomes a desirable trait – it is important to assess if this is present.

A better understanding of predictive indicators of intent, or of possible future behavioural development, can also enable early preventive intervention and safer handling within the home, at veterinary practices and elsewhere.

Influencing factors

Where possible, seeing a dog in its usual environment with its owner usually gives the most true and full picture of its behaviour, by a combination of direct assessment, and by taking a full history – covering a wide range of situations – and, if well-judged, open questions are asked. However, owners may lack experience and objectivity, be in denial or use euphemistic terms for things they would rather not acknowledge, most commonly, aggression.

It must be remembered behaviour does not occur in a vacuum, but is a response to stimuli, so the precise qualities of any internal (for example, physiological) or external stimuli experienced at that time can have a dramatically differing effect on the behaviour shown. Handler influences can also have a very marked effect on dog behaviour, as can the characteristics of the physical environment the animal is in. Is it distracting or barren, familiar or unfamiliar? Does the dog find that particular unfamiliar environment exciting, distracting or intimidating? What other individuals are present? The weather can also affect outcome.

The style and order different elements of an assessment are conducted in can have a highly significant influence on whether it is a neutral assessment of each section, otherwise it may become a structured behavioural modification session. First impressions can count for a lot, so assertive, challenging or controlling elements on the part of the assessor should be conducted towards the end, rather than at the beginning.

You can only assess what is seen or reliably known. If it is known some incident has occurred before, it may not be possible (or safe) to reproduce that behaviour. This doesn't mean it didn't happen, just that something is different, which, in itself, can be important information in terms of interpreting what occurred and why or what future controls or management may be required.

Behaviour is like a recipe with a multitude of ingredients blending, interacting and balancing each other. Change any ingredient slightly, or how they combine together, and the outcome can be entirely different.

Puppy tests

In puppy testing the animal goes through a series of tests, such as being held on its back, looking at its eagerness to follow someone, or how it responds to a thrown toy – for example, does it ignore the object, play with it and stay away, or fetch it for the handler.

Except in identifying puppies with a lower than average aggression threshold, which may require more expert upbringing as they mature, puppy tests to rank litter mates, or to predict future behaviour, have not been found to be generally reliable in identifying adult traits. However, when used with selective breeding and careful rearing, such as in guide dogs and some police dogs, the results in producing adult dogs possessing the required traits can be much more reliable.

These combined methods tend to minimise the failure rate during training, through early identification of dogs less likely to make the grade, thereby avoiding wasted training costs.

If two testers are used, with slightly different personalities or techniques, this may produce different results and can contribute to unreliability. Conducting the tests in itself creates a learning experience. Timing also affects outcome. If a confident, “pushy” puppy has just worn itself out bullying its litter mates the response to mild restraint may be different from assessing it when the puppy is rested or looking for competitive play.

In some individuals, undesirable, intensely expressed breed-related traits may only become apparent after social maturity is attained – for example, overly keen territorial aggression or very low threshold intraspecific aggression, even in previously sociable dogs that experienced careful, extensive and previously successful socialising prior to maturity.

In terms of predicting future behaviour and development, aside from life stage developmental

changes, any specific, significant events with inevitable associated learning can cause major behavioural changes and can be extremely difficult to eradicate due to powerful negative or positive emotions, sometimes resulting in one-trial learning.

Situational cues

All surgeries will see canine inpatients that are very difficult with veterinary staff, but who instantly convert to lovable, cuddly pets at the return of their familiar owner, or who will ferociously kennel guard, but be fine once out of that confined, defined space. These are all “true” and valid reflections of different facets of that pet’s personality under differing circumstances.

Likewise, most vets and veterinary staff are familiar with those dogs that may behave much more calmly and be more easily handled away from the owner, either because they are then not getting inappropriate confidence or reinforcement from the owner, or they are not picking up on owner anxiety, or because the owner is not there as a valuable resource to guard, while also possibly defining a personal space perimeter.

There can also be other triggers for some dogs when presenting at the surgery.

Whether the outline of a person is familiar to a dog can be very significant. Many dogs fail to immediately recognise familiar people if their outline is made unfamiliar, such as by adding an umbrella, rucksack, hat or maybe a loose, flapping coat or high visibility jacket.

With some dogs, who holds the lead is very significant in conveying who is in control. Some will be very aggressive to an approaching third party while the owner holds the lead, but not if they are aware the third party is the lead holder, even when the physical proximities are the same. It is as well to be aware of this when passing over the lead of a difficult dog to the owner at collection time.

With all these variables it is virtually impossible to test for everything. Therefore, in general, a representative sample must be selected, as far as circumstances allow, with due regard for the safety and welfare of all concerned. People and/ or animals should not be put in fear or at risk, but it should also be remembered that safety equipment, such as muzzles and leads, barriers, cages or fencing, can all dramatically affect the response shown by the dog. Within a behaviour assessment, equipment, including umbrellas, hats, squeaky toys, noisy metal bowls and chase and tug toys, can be used to gain information about a dog’s responses and temperament ([Figure 2](#)).

Health

A dog’s weight and physical fitness can also affect its behaviour, with severely underweight animals possibly lacking energy or being obsessively concerned about food. Obese dogs may also lack energy, find it difficult to move or be feeling pain – for example, due to extra strain being placed on joints or ligaments. So a different picture may present if the dog were reassessed at its

correct weight.

Other changes in health – such as if the dog has become ill or developed a painful condition – can also affect behaviour, possibly making the dog lethargic, irritable, painful or hyperactive.

Conclusion

Results need expert interpretation by an experienced, knowledgeable behaviourist familiar with a large number of dogs of various temperaments in a range of circumstances for comparative purposes. It must also be someone good at noting and reading both slight, subtle and obvious indicators and differentiating between those that are positive indicators of something or those possibly predictive of potential future behaviour.

It is impossible to assess and predict the dog's behaviour in every situation it might find itself in.

Because animals, and the humans they encounter and interact with, can be highly unpredictable, any report relating to a behavioural assessment should always state those were the results under the terms, circumstances and conditions in place at the time of the assessment being performed.



Figure 1. You may be required to assess if a dog is safe and sociable with cats and other animals.



Figure 2. Some equipment used for behaviour assessment.

