

Behaviour Assessments for Dogs

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ABOUT ME...

Dog trainer 20 years

Four Paws K9 Training head trainer and director 18 years

Growly Grovers - dog aggression rehab program 6 years

NDTF lecturer on Aggression 4 years

Behaviour assessments - general 11 years

Behaviour assessments - rescue groups 7 years

Behaviour assessments - legal, court cases, Councils - 4 years

Expert witness for VCAT and Magistrates court cases

Published author of "When Three's a Crowd, managing a multiple dog household", 2016

Appeared on TV programs as trainer and training advisor

Why assess?

Behaviour assessments are conducted for the following main reasons:

- Suitability for rehoming
- After an incident (dog attack, bite)
- Assessments provide a non-biased interpretation of a dog's behaviour which could result in:
 - the dog finding its 'forever home' - improving successful adoption rates - minimising returns..
 - enabling panels (minor incident @ Council) or Magistrates (serious incident @ court) to understand the circumstances of an incident and the behavioural traits shown by a dog, thereby handing down more appropriate orders for that animal.

Why assess?

TO ASSESS OR NOT TO ASSESS?

- A *US study is likening behaviour assessments to being “no better than flipping a coin”

(Note: some of the study used results of human diagnostic tests to reach some of their conclusions)

- Behaviour assessments should be used to create a profile of the individual dog as a unique combination of the many traits working together to influence the dog's responses.
- Assessments should NOT be pass or fail based
- Rather they should be a tool to allow for observations of behaviours and patterns of responses from dogs



Why assess?

- A well conducted assessment can.....
- Evaluate suitability for immediate rehoming, rehabilitation and also level of risk
- Identify problematic patterns of responses - potentially dangerous
- Provide behaviour modification recommendations



What a behaviour assessment may NOT predict!

- **All aggression**

May not predict whether a dog will show aggression to humans or other animals in a new environment and under **all** situations

- **Some fears**

May not predict sound phobias (thunder, household machinery etc), animals (horses, cattle) and anything else not tested for

- **Sociability to all humans**

May not predict sociability towards **all** humans to include, babies, toddlers, elderly, skin colour, disabilities etc

Why assess?

- Past and recent incidents involving dogs not assessed prior to rehoming:
 - Resource guarding Alaskan Malamute - bit 2 people (now euthanised)
 - Resource guarding and touch sensitive Husky - bit 3 people (now euthanised)
 - JRT who bit child on face (returned to rescue - in progress)
 - JRT x who severely bit foster carer due to touch sensitisation (returned to rescue - fate unknown)
 - SBT under assessment with severe touch sensitivity (surrendered to LDH fate unknown)



Why assess?

- In most cases the testing is not performed correctly - dog stressed and pushed too far and/or no re-assessment done
- As a duty of care, we need to know if the dog in question may have a tendency to show unfavourable behaviours when placed in certain situations
- Example: Resource guarding has a strong genetic link
- As a trainer who is called in to 'fix' a growing number of resource guarding issues in dogs, testing **SHOULD** be done and should be done properly!



Why assess?

- To paraphrase the *US study...for every 100 shelter dogs tested, around 16% of dogs expressed behaviours of concern. *(Notes within the study imply that dogs with a history of biting/aggression are already excluded from these statistics)*
- Therefore potentially 16 out of every 100 dogs could exhibit problematic behaviours in the future
- We need to know if any dog, either in a shelter, rescue or in council care, falls into that category

Why assess?

- Behaviour assessments assess the following:
 - Dog's general traits/personality
 - Specific presentation of behaviours
 - Responses to situations/stimuli (both when stressed and in a calm state)

A photograph of a brown and white dog, possibly a pit bull mix, standing in a grassy field. The dog is looking towards the left and has its mouth slightly open, showing its teeth. The background is a blurred green field. Overlaid on the image is the text "GENERAL TRAITS ASSESSED FOR" in a large, bold, black font.

GENERAL TRAITS ASSESSED FOR

GENERAL TRAITS

- There are 10 main general traits assessed and profiled in an individual dog
- Each trait provides specific information on the dog's general demeanour when presented with stimuli
- In brief...they are:

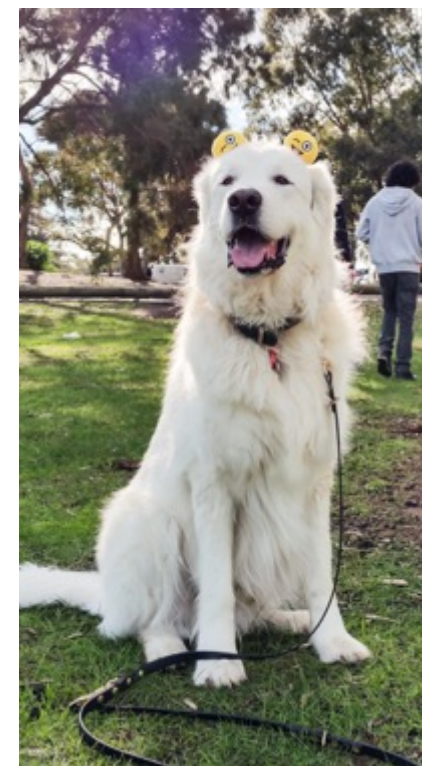
AROUSAL

- “A state of heightened physiological activity”
- What is functional and productive according to environment



RESILIENCE

- The rate of recovery and the positive capacity to cope under constant stress or stressors



ENERGY

- Physical energy: the pattern/speed of motor activity (movement) typical for the dog



SOCIABILITY

- The disposition to be sociable or associate with others
- The dog's interest to interact socially WITHOUT BEING PROMPTED



SOCIAL TOLERANCE

- Tolerant and forgiving under provocation



USE OF SPACE

- Deliberate use of body and space, yielding or taking space as communication (leaning, body slam, mouthing etc)



PERSISTENCE

- The act of persisting or persevering, continuing or repeating behaviour, determination (predatory, olfactory etc)



PATIENCE/IMPULSE CONTROL


- Forbearance, good natured, tolerant of delay or incompetence



BIDDABILITY

- Compliant, willing to carry out orders or wishes of another without protest
- Willingness to be directed or willingness to yield to another's plan or direction..to be cooperative to work



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a dog's face, showing its eyes, nose, and fur. The dog has light brown and white fur. The image is used as a background for the title text.

ELEMENTS OF THE ASSESSMENT PROFILING THE DOG

Profiling the dog

General components of assessing/profiling: The dog's main general traits profiled will fall under different aspects of the assessment.

General disposition observation

Stress/anxiety levels
Activity
Arousal
Energy
Use of space
Sociability
Persistence
Resilience

Touch/Restraint exercise

Sociability
Social tolerance
Use of space
Patience

Sounds/Sudden environment stimuli

Resilience
Energy
Social tolerance

Obedience exercise

Biddability
General obedience skills

Play behaviour

Arousal
Sociability
Biddability
Energy
Persistence
Use of space

Frustration test

Persistence
Arousal
Patience
Use of space
Biddability

*Food test

Social tolerance

Dog to dog/cat

Sociability to other dogs/cats
Persistence
Arousal

THE ASSESSOR



The Assessor

- Must be fully trained in assessing/profiling dogs
- Must attend regular refreshers and re-training sessions
- Must be well versed in canine behaviour, body language and all traits
- Have experience in handling, managing, training and observing dogs
- Should not assess with biased opinions about breed, sex or any other element
- Well prepared for assessment
- Provide objective views only

TESTING A STRESSED DOG



Testing a stressed dog

- This is not a bad thing.....!!!!
- Some suggest that it's 'not fair' and unrealistic to test a dog in this state
- Not correct!
- Assessing a dog at peak of stress provides valuable information on how the dog may react when placed in stressful situations **when outside in the real world - we need this information!!!**
- Stress hormone, cortisol, can take up to 2 days to lower, therefore recommend re-assessing after 3 days and record difference in responses

RE-ASSESSMENTS



Re-assessments

- Where possible, all dogs should be re-assessed
- Should be done 3 days after the initial assessment if possible
- Dog's stress levels should be lower at this point - presentations of behaviours may be different
- Where possible with the same assessors and in the same location
- Must cover the exact elements as the first assessment - comparisons
- Both assessment outcomes must be taken into consideration when writing summaries/recommendations etc

WORDING



Wording

- Use an appropriately designed assessment template
- Where possible avoid use of emotive/descriptive wording in the assessments like:
 - Friendly, happy, sad, angry, aggressive, dominant
- Stick with objective terminology which best describes what you see, such as:
 - Mouth open, panting, relaxed body, tense body, lip licking, growling, persistent jumping, rushed approach, teeth baring

Template and wording

- example of selection tick boxes with various behaviours

[illegible]

CONSOLIDATING RESULTS



Consolidating Results

- Tally any scoring feature in your report
- Ensure all notes are clear and can be easily understood
- Scores should be used as a GUIDE ONLY, not to make final decisions on fate of the dog
- Re-assess the dog (2 or 3 times if time permits)
- For difficult cases, get an independent report done by trainer/behaviourist
- Independent report should provide dog profile only and NOT recommendations on the fate of the dog (life or death)
- Independent report may provide recommendations for any rehab/training or other approach as required
- Final decisions as to fate of dog should be with your own organisation's panel based on all outcomes.

Questions??