

Behavioral Assessment & Reactivity Checklist

Developed by: Robert Cabral - Bound Angels

The premise of the canine temperament test has been widely disputed among animal rights people due to the unfair elements imposed on the dog. The primary reason for this controversy is the blanket “pass or fail” method that is applied to the outcome of the assessment. Assessing a dog’s behavior should not be gauged *pass or fail*; rather we should strive to *define* the dog’s behavior. We must use this assessment as a litmus to understand the dog’s true temperament. To more clearly understand this, let’s define the term “temperament.”

To equate the word to a human level, we can define temperament as a dog’s “personality.” Seeing it in these terms, we should be able to clearly define what a dog’s strong and weak traits are, and how to properly address them. For example, a dog that is fearful of other dogs or even dominant toward them is not a dog that should be put down, but it would be good to know this information before placing him into a home with other dogs, or with a weak handler. Rather, this dog should be placed with a rescue organization that could work at rehabilitating the dog. If we can assess a dog’s needs, we can offer better solutions to place him in an environment best suited for him.

Although this assessment tool is designed to be as detailed as possible, we must understand that a dog is a living, breathing, ever-changing animal that may react one way during an assessment and differently once placed in a different environment. A great example of this is the likelihood of a dog acting more dominant around a weaker handler and less dominant around someone who is firmer. Dogs are conditioned by their environment, as well as by the people and animals that surround them.

If an assessment were performed in a completely sterile environment, the results would be useless because we never place our dogs in a truly sterile environment. The assessment is designed to give us a snapshot of a dog’s personality, and as responsible people we must use this information in the best interest of the dog being assessed.

It is my contention that few, if any dogs, should ever be killed because of behavioral or aggression issues. More than 90% of dominance and aggression can be treated through proper behavior modification by a qualified trainer or behaviorist. Much of this can be done with positive, reward-based methods, but we should not rule out correction-based training if it is the sole option to saving a dog’s life. I would rather put a correction upon a dog than a needle in his vein. To say otherwise is playing God for an animal that deserves every option before a last resort.

All training should start with a treat and a toy; where it goes from there is up to the individual dog. Training a dog, that is, teaching dog basic commands (i.e., sit, stay,

down, come, etc.) should only be done through motivational methods. Enforcement of commands once we know the dog understands what we want can employ well-suited corrections, as long as they are fair to the dog. A correction is merely a *direction* for a dog to do what I'm trying to get him to do. For example, if a dog that I'm handling is pulling toward another dog and I say, NO, I can give a leash correction to take the dog away from that situation, thereby "correcting" him into compliance.

Thousands of dogs are killed every year for a plethora of reasons, some of which include bad behavior. If even a small percentage of them could be saved by proper behavioral evaluations and retraining, our work will be worthwhile. Furthermore, if we can offer another small percentage of these dogs another chance at life by instilling good behavior into them, it would be the greatest gift. All too often, people approach dogs with a blanket opinion, such as, "If the dog will not change his behavior through positive based methods, he will not change." Others say that correction-based training doesn't retain its strength. I would argue that, with much experience to the contrary. I have trained many dogs with correction-based methods (because the motivational techniques would not work due to the immense drive of the particular dog) and these dogs have maintained their good behavior over many years. These dogs showed serious aggression issues prior to training and are now living happy lives.

We must step outside of our egos and give the dog what he needs, not what we think he needs.

A word of caution to those performing the behavioral assessment: Working with a dog that exhibits dominant or aggressive behaviors cannot be compared to performing an assessment on an unknown dog. Dogs may behave erratically or out of control during a behavioral assessment. There is an inherent risk of being bitten during an assessment, so extreme caution should be used. Do not let your guard down during any part of the interaction with the dog.

A Note on Underlying Issues: There are several things that can sway a dog negatively in a behavioral assessment, and it's imperative that they be addressed here:

- A dog should not be assessed immediately upon entering the shelter. The dog is in a highly stressed state and may react out of confusion. An assessment conducted on a dog within 12-24 hours of entering the shelter is not deemed valid. Dogs that are sick, including kennel cough or after any surgery requiring anesthesia, should not be assessed until they are well or at least 48 hours after surgery. If recovery is necessary (for example, setting a broken bone or major surgery) the dog must be fully recovered, with no touch sensitivity before assessing. If the dog is assessed with stitches or staples still intact, the area in question must be avoided.

- Dogs should not be assessed immediately before or after feeding time and should not be removed from feeding for an assessment. Furthermore, a dog should not be assessed in the proximity of other dogs that are eating.
- Dogs should not be assessed in the immediate vicinity of kennel mates still in the kennel. If dogs have issues with hip dysplasia, joint issues or pain related reactivity, this issue should be taken into account and disclosed on the assessment.

The Assessor: Having performed hundreds of these assessments, I can confirm that no dog will respond the exact same way to two different people. In order to be fair to the dog, we must be sure that the dog has no blanket issue with the person performing the assessment. When I say blanket issue, I mean overly negative or positive. The best person to conduct an assessment is a person who can detach him or herself from the task at hand and handle a dog neutrally.

If a dog really seems to like someone, that person may be likely to get inaccurate results on some parts of the assessment; however, a negative pre-association to the assessor is the most important aspect we should focus to avoid.

The assessor's background needs not to be a medical one. Some trainers make great assessors - some don't. Some people may be too wishy-washy to deal with a strong dog at a moment's notice, while others are so dominant in tone that they cannot get a dog to relax enough in order to be playful or to exhibit his true personality. The assessors must be neutral to "his favorite breed." Playing favorites or skewing an assessment because the handler is not a fan of the breed is unfair and has no place in a behavioral assessment. The level of energy spent dealing with the first dog should be the same as with the last; therefore it is advisable to consider how many assessments the person can perform before requiring a break or ending assessing dogs for a given day. I've assessed 15-20 dogs in a 3-4 hour time frame, for basic assessments, while other dogs have consumed many hours over several days in order to get a fair idea of the dog's personality.

The assessor is equally capable as a man or a woman and most any age. I look for a couple of qualifications for the person doing the assessments. The most important is the person's ability to *read* a dog. This generally comes with much experience in dealing with dogs that may have personality disorders. Dog trainers who spend most of their time in clients' homes often don't have the ability to read a dog that may exhibit behavioral issues - be they good or bad.

The attire of the person assessing the dog should allow them to interact freely with the dog. I generally wear jeans, boots and a t-shirt. If a person has sensitive skin, I suggest wearing a long-sleeved shirt or thin jacket to avoid getting scratched. Bulky clothes will inhibit movement, and freedom of movement is imperative when interacting with the dog. The reason I suggest a firm shoe or boot is that some dogs may become nippy at feet, and sneakers or sandals will leave our feet open to the dog's "attacks" - regardless if they are playful or serious. I also suggest avoiding

clothing that makes rustling noises (such as nylon jackets) as this may distract a dog during the assessment.

The assessor should be strong enough to control a dog at a moment's notice and compassionate enough to give each dog assessed a fair chance.

The Environment: Assessing a dog at a shelter is not a perfect scenario. There are so many smells and sounds that trigger a dog to react in a way that may sway the assessment. This sway can be for the good or bad. Some dogs may respond more aggressively / reactive in this environment and passively in a more neutral environment. Therefore, when assessing a dog at a shelter, I advocate for a field / yard or area away from the medical, exam and intake area – as well as away from the main kennel area of the shelter whenever possible. If this is not possible, try to be as far away as you can.

How the dog is brought to the area will also influence the outcome. I suggest that a dog be brought from its kennel to the area in a neutral manner. There should be no talking, petting or jerking the dog around. If the dog decides to engage in cage fighting, move the dog straight along. Correcting the dog incites a behavior in his mind that will sway the assessment, as well as his experience with the handler.

Initial Kennel Approach: My initial method to meeting the dog to be assessed is to approach the kennel, give the dog a treat or just drop a treat on the floor of the kennel and stand there for a brief moment. I always use a noose to secure the dog, generally luring him to the front of the kennel and then taking him out. If he is skittish, I will enter the kennel and noose him from there – again, my attitude remains very aloof. No matter how fearful or dominant the dog acts, I do not engage in any dialog or training methods at this point. If the dog is posturing, I do not approach him straight on; instead I approach from the side.

I do not like to use a catchpole on a dog, and up to now have never felt the need to use one in an evaluation. The experience of the pole places a negative imprint on the dog that will impact the results. If the dog cannot be safely handled by use of a simple noose, we need to give the dog more time or bring him into an area where he *can* be handled with a slip lead.

Once the dog is on the rope, we walk past the other dogs and get to the training area as quickly as possible, and with as little drama as possible.

Once in the area, I leave the leash on the dog and allow him to run free for a few moments. If you are using a simple noose leash, I suggest you tie a knot above the ring to avoid the dog slipping out or getting his feet tangled. Some of the shepherd's leashes have a small piece of leather that can be slipped down to avoid loosening of the collar. In either case, I prefer to leave the dog on the leash during the entire assessment; I suggest you do the same.

More than likely, the dog will enjoy this initial bit of freedom and we can see if he runs up to other people in the area (although they should remain neutral and not engage the dog). He may also become fixated on something or he may need to relieve himself.

Possession Assessment: At this point I want to see how possessive the dog is over a particular toy or object. Is his possessiveness over a particular toy or is he possessive over anything that he believes is his? The key to assessing possessiveness with a dog is to always offer him another toy or reward of equal or greater value when trying to remove the first object. Just trying to yank a toy from a dog's mouth does not prove possessiveness, at least not on the dog's side. Offering him other items shows his dedication to the object he is currently dealing with. Also, if this item has him fixated, I may re-introduce it later to see if he will *lock* onto it again.

Most dogs are able to strike an object with a bite if it is moving in a normal *charged* manner. A big mistake people make is moving an item in an erratic manner when introducing it to the dog. The dog may inadvertently bite the skin or hand of the handler and thereby placing a strike against him. This is not a failure for the dog, but more a failure of the handler. Introducing an item on a string that we can toss or *activate* on the ground serves as the best introduction of a toy. Furthermore, if I activate the toy, *that is I pull on it while the dog has a hold on it*, the dog's natural instinct will be to pull back. You will not get an object out of a dog's mouth by pulling on it against the dog's grip, nor will you free the object by having someone yanking back on the dog while you are holding the object. The way to free the object through compulsion is to use a collar correction from the front of the dog while pulling or holding onto the object. However, I do not do this during an assessment, as this leads into training and behavior modification.

The idea of an assessment is to remain neutral.

Dogs that go from toy to toy are perfectly suited in normal behavior and show a high level of curiosity. Dogs that fixate on an object and cannot be pulled away from that object – no matter what the secondary reward is – are quite rare but show a strong dedication and drive. Dogs that bite or attack when approached while playing need to be schooled in the proper etiquette of play.

There are different approaches to separating a dog from the object he is possessing:

- Remove the object from the dog while securing (or having another person secure) the dog. Offer a second item to the dog to make a swap.
- The best method is not to remove the item from the dog, but instead remove the dog from the item. If I use this method, I can bring the dog back to the item and see if his level of drive or possessiveness has gone up, down or

remained the same.

If a dog growls when approached while playing with an item, he is exhibiting resource-guarding tendencies. These tendencies are prevalent in strong personality dogs. If a dog snaps when approached, a correction should be delivered and the situation should be repeated.

Dogs that resource guard to an extreme extent can be retrained through both motivational- and correction-based training. Although it is a rare trait in all but a few dogs, resource guarding is a behavioral issue that needs to be addressed. What is important here is to clearly differentiate between a dog that is truly guarding to attack, from one that is growling in a manner to initiate continuation of play. This can generally be observed by noting the body language of the dog: Still body, hackles up, stiffness and eyes peering up are signs the dog is guarding and remaining possessive over the item. Loose energy, flexible body and mid-level growling while moving away from the item or holding it is a general indication that he wishes the game to continue.

Next, I will introduce a few toys, tugs or treats to see how the dog responds. I watch how the dog responds to me, the environment and to each item that I bring out of my bag as I retain an indifferent attitude. I do not start a play session with the dog at this point. I am merely looking at the dog's curiosity or drive toward the items I am handling. Is he excited, curious, pushy or indifferent?

I will throw a toy and see if he chases it, then I will throw another toy. Does he immediately go for the other toy and forget about the first? If not, I will approach him and offer him a treat or another toy from my hand to see if he'll give up the current toy. If not, I will grab hold of the toy and hold it. I do not pull it, jerk it or tug on it. I merely deaden the object. The best toy to use for this is a tug or ball on a string.

To avoid getting bitten, I secure a hold of the leash or noose the dog has been wearing the entire time. When you deaden an object, a dog will generally lose interest and let go. If he lets go, I throw it for him again and let him chase it. This shows that a dog has a natural prey drive and he is acting very normal. A dog that holds onto a toy that I have secured in my hand is not necessarily an aggressive dog; instead he is showing an engagement to me.

If a dog snaps when you grab the toy he is holding, this could be seen as aggression or "re-biting" – something a dog does to get a firmer hold on the object. If the dog "re-bites" the object, keep the object motionless and see if he loses interest. A dog may "re-bite" an object a number of times before losing interest. If the dog snarls, growls or postures when you handle the object, we see this as a dominant tendency and he should be given a fair correction to see if he responds. Failing a dog due to possessiveness without offering him a fair correction is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is our job to read a dog for his personality, and some dogs require a

slight correction to fall into line. If the dog becomes aggressive or continues his dominance, he is showing some tendencies toward possessiveness.

Depending on the level of the dog's possessiveness, I will present another object to the dog to see if he feigns interest in it. When assessing a dog for possessiveness, we should see what the dog is possessive toward (food, toys, etc.). A dog with possession issues will continue to be possessive over an object even if we think he's lost interest in it. In his mind, he sees everything as his and no one can touch any of his possessions. That is why using multiple objects as a replacement gives us insight as to the dog's true drive.

Although there are ways to separate the item from the dog in a compulsive manner, we should not be concerned with this during an assessment. If we can't get the item away from the dog during the assessment with the above explanation(s), then one of two things is true:

1. We are not qualified to handle this particular dog.
2. The dog is truly a difficult dog and should be rescue only and placed in a behavior modification program.

** I would venture to say that more than likely #1 holds true for most situations. Unless a dog assaults with a bite or attack for trying to get the object away from him, there are many ways to get the object away from him. Please see previous sections of this book for more detailed explanations.*

The Touch / Handling Assessment: To start, we should understand that dogs don't generally like to be handled –that is often the reason why children get bit by dogs when they crawl on top of them and parents do nothing to stop it. I do not blame dogs for responding in this way, since it is a part of their natural behavior. Hugging dogs, lying on top of them, pinning them, or excessive handling makes dogs feel the need to break free. Bearing this in mind, there are several things that I will look for in the handling assessment.

Step 1. I start with the dog on the noose and offer him a treat. I will touch him gently on the head and move my way down the body. I touch the back, sides and underside of the dog. I will apply slight pressure to the front shoulders and back hips. I will stroke his tail and I may hold it for a brief moment. All of this is done while I maintain control of the rope attached to the dog's neck. It is important that there be enough slack in the rope to keep the dog from feeling tension, but the slack should be short enough to allow the handler to gain immediate control of the dog if he turns to bite. If he does turn to bite, our reaction should be indifferent. We can correct the dog and protect ourselves, but getting emotional or angry is not part of our job on this assessment. If we see that the issue is fear-based, we can spend some time reassuring the dog and repeating the touch assessment to the sensitive area(s).

Most items covered here will elicit a unique response in different dogs. A dog that does not like to be touched can still be a good pet, but probably should not be placed with small children. Dogs that have hindquarter sensitivity or tail-handling issues also are not a good fit for children.

** Again, the goal of a proper behavioral assessment is to clearly define the best home for a dog. We hope to offer him a chance and open up space for other dogs.*

Step 2. When assessing the *touch phase*, I will also approach the dog from the rear, as some dogs spook easily when people do this. Some dogs will just turn around with surprise and then recover. The key to this is that the assessor must remain neutral. If the assessor spooks at the *dog's reaction*, the dog may nip or move forward, and rightfully so. Approaching a dog and then regressing elicits a forward motion from the dog (prey drive). If you approach the average dog and then regress, you will find that the dog moves forward. Similarly moving forward (as in chasing the dog) generally elicits a recoiling movement from the dog.

Step 3. During the touch phase, if I see a neutral or playful reaction from the dog I will continue on with the assessment. Next, I try to lift the dog's front paws and hold them for a brief moment. Slight pressure will show if there is any sensitivity in the dog's paws, which might require medical attention. I will also reward each touch with a reward, namely a treat and / or praise. I want to remain fair to the dog and when a dog sees he's getting rewarded, he will more than likely go along with the assessment and not become irritated. There is no logic to assessing a *dog's limit* unless you want the dog to fail. People who continue with a barrage of assaults on the dog, including pokes, jabs and overt handling are forcing a dog to fail. The assessment must remain neutral, and keeping the dog calm is the simplest way to keep the assessment neutral for the dog. If a dog responds positively when I act positively, I know his personality. Similarly, if a dog reacts negatively to me when I approach positively, I can be clear that there may be a problem.

Step 4. I will move along and see if the dog allows all of his paws and legs to be handled. If so, I continue. Remember, that a dog who offers his front legs is showing submission, rear legs have no indication of submission and are often more likely to elicit a different response. However, a dog that allows you to pick up all of his paws is generally a very solid dog, with few issues. This is rare, but there are dogs like this.

Step 5. With smaller dogs, I will try lifting them off of the ground to see how they respond to handling. Although I feel that carrying a dog is wrong unless it is injured, I do include it in my assessment because so many people insist on carrying smaller dogs. A dog should remain relaxed when I pick him up. Dogs that become stiff are not comfortable being picked up and should not be pushed any further.

Step 6. Although I am vehemently against pulling a dog's tail, I include it in my assessment because of the irresponsible parents who may not tell their child that this is wrong. Some dogs have a big issue with it. I watch the dog's head carefully as I grab hold of the tail and tug slightly. If the dog turns to bite, a good hold on his tail can protect you from getting bitten. However, you should still have hold of the leash with your other hand.

Step 7. Ears and eyes. To assess a dog's ears and eyes, I squat next to the dog and rub his head and move over to the ears, lifting them up and gently massage them. I bring my hand forward toward the dog's nose and cover one eye at a time to see the dog's reaction. Ideally, the dog will not respond. A common response is for the dog to squirm his head around to move out from under your hand. If the dog does this more than once, he is not comfortable with eye handling and that should be noted. It is not a negative in any manner, unless the dog becomes aggressive or reactive.

Step 8. Mouth. I will rub the dog's head and move my hand toward his mouth. If he's fine, I can use my fingers to open the dog's lips and immediately offer him a treat. I'll repeat this on both sides. It's important to be extremely careful when handling a dog's mouth with your hands. I suggest watching for any indications, and if they arise, abort this portion of the assessment. There is no sense in getting bitten to prove a point.

As you may note, I offer a treat to a dog for compliance. This is important for the dog to see that he is being assessed and not bribed. If he is truly a problem dog, he will respond negatively, whether I offer him a treat or not. Offering him a reward gives us a fair idea of his compliance. Those who argue that giving treats during an assessment sways the results are biased toward failing dogs in these assessments.

Food Assessment: Perhaps the worst aspect of temperament *test* that has ever been introduced is the use of a plastic hand to *test* a dog for food aggression. I could write a book on this topic alone, but I'll withhold my litany and just say that it is idiotic for many reasons. The primary reason is that a dog that is eating should not be disturbed. For those people who think that this "test" is important because children may approach a dog while he is eating, I suggest that you train children not to interfere with a dog that is eating. Furthermore, a dog that bites a plastic hand is biting an object that has absolutely no relation to a human hand; he may or may not bite a hand, but the plastic one gives us no clear indication. You can use a broomstick or pipe with the exact same results.

Since dogs are creatures of scent, we are betraying the dog's strongest drive by introducing a plastic prosthetic because – whether it looks like a hand or not – it's not a human hand to the dog. Remember, there is no need to reach into a dog's bowl while he is eating – NONE! Dogs that have food issues may have a right to have these issues: if a dog has been at the shelter and has not had enough to eat or has lived in the streets where food is in short supply, he may exhibit behaviors that he

has learned to keep him alive. I am more interested in a dog's food issues as they relate to other dogs, as opposed to humans. Furthermore, retraining a dog to lose biting tendencies toward people (not children) is not impossible. Therefore, with a little work we can fix a problem that would otherwise be a death sentence for a dog.

I assess a dog for food issues using my hands and treats in a much different and much fairer way. I offer the dog a treat and let him take it from my hand. Then I offer another and partially remove it. I want to see the dog's drive in trying to get the treat back. Will he back down or pursue my hand for the treat? I want to see how the dog takes the treat from my hand. This will show me that the dog can differentiate my hand from a treat, and it also reveals his level of drive for food. I watch a dog's behavior when I have food in my hand, as well as when I reach into my bag or pouch for more food. I may even eat in front of the dog and watch his drive.

Follow these steps in order, and do not progress to the next step if the dog is reacting adversely in the current step.

Step 1. When the dog approaches, offer him a treat, preferably something about 3-6 inches long, such as a strip of jerky. Allow the dog to bite it off or break it off when it is in his mouth.

Step 2. Offer the dog another treat and, as he begins to bite down, pull the treat back out of his mouth. What is his reaction? Confusion? Regression? Assertiveness?

Step 3. Drop a piece of the treat on the ground and as soon as the dog sees it, cover it with your foot. Observe the reaction: Confusion? (Looking up to you.) Assertiveness? (Digging at the treat.) Indifference? (*Hopefully you are wearing boots.*)

Step 4. When the dog is eating the treat, begin some mild general handling (head patting, body contact, moving around). If he's steady and comfortable with you, he will continue eating the treat from your hand. If he gets confused, he will stop and back up. If he becomes irritated, he may growl or snap your hand.

Step 5. Initiate some mouth handling while the dog is eating the treat. I begin touching lips, chin, and nose and cover his eyes. These are trigger areas, but we are approaching them in a manner that is fair to the dog. The best result to see is a dog that remains focused on the food and pays little attention to your handling. Remember, you will not proceed to this step if the dog showed any adverse reaction in the previous step(s).

Step 6. Introduce another dog into the immediate (but not reachable) vicinity of the dog. Begin offering the other dog treats while the *dog being assessed* is ignored. He should be close enough to see the other dog being fed, but not close enough to connect. At this point, if the dog has shown favorable responses to the rest of this

assessment I move forward and bring the two dogs closer together. I will drop some treats for one dog, and immediately reach across and drop some for the other dog. I generally will do this with an assistant or I will tie one dog off to a pole. It will be nearly impossible to handle both dogs during this assessment and dispense food and watch for behaviors. Be diligent in this phase – it will be an important part of the evaluation.

If your dog moves toward the other dog in a dominant manner, he should be corrected and reintroduced immediately. By *dominant* it is understood that the dog is going after the other dog and not the food, and he is going after the other dog in order to get the food. The dogs should be able to take treats at the same time from the ground or should ignore the treats while the other dog eats. Both of these are highly favorable responses.

The correction here should be in the form of a leash correction, showing the dog that this behavior is not acceptable. Once corrected, I've found that most dogs will settle down and share the treats or ignore the other dog. A dog that shows possessiveness toward food can be retrained, or an easier solution to the problem is to insist on a separate feeding area for the dog. Dogs in shelters are often very food possessive and might lose this tendency in a fairly structured home. This is in no way a red-strike against the dog; it is merely an observation toward better understanding of how to handle this particular dog.

Correction Assessment: How a dog responds to basic corrections on a leash is a good indication of how well he will be able to adjust to many social environments. Using the noose that we've left on the dog during the entire assessment, I will walk the dog around the field, near other people and near distractions. I will let the dog sniff something for a few moments and then give a slight tug on the leash followed, by a verbal direction. Here I look for his immediate and secondary responses.

Upon administering the correction, I look to see if he redirects his attention to me, which is what I'm looking for. Does he drop in fear, does his tail go between his legs or does his back become hunched? Does he completely ignore me and keep doing what he's doing? Or does he redirect toward me? That is to say, does he turn to bite the person who delivered the correction? Any reaction but the last one is okay. A dog that redirects and tries to bite the person delivering a slight redirection should be looked at further.

It is important that the correction be a tug on the leash, not a crushing blow. It will need to be scaled from smaller dogs to larger dogs and should be at the level to merely get the dog's attention away from what he is focused on. Only the smallest percentage of dogs will redirect and try to bite the handler.

Dominance Assessment: I want to be clear here that I suggest assessing a dog for dominance without drawing a conclusion that a dominant dog is a bad dog. All dogs have a level of dominance and checking for *it* is paramount to understanding the dog. As an assessor, I consider it my obligation to know what the dog will and will not tolerate. For example, if I am assessing a dog that will be handled by children, I will grab the dog's tail and give it a slight tug. Yes, this may be a silly test, but I know for a fact that a child will pull a dog's tail given the chance, and if the parents do not teach a child not to, I want to know what the dog's reaction will be. If the dog gets crazy from a tail pulling, I would note that and would not place the dog with small children.

Again, these assessments are not to disqualify a dog from "passing or failing," simply to disqualify the dog from a home that would be unsuitable for the dog.

If you're clear that the dog is dominant, it is a bad idea to do the following assessments, as you may get bitten. These assessments are to classify a dog as dominant if we are uncertain, and if he displays dominant tendencies during the assessment, what will be his reaction? Will he move away to avoid or will he strike back?

Step 1. Push down on a dog's shoulders using your hand and forearm. Submissive dogs will melt down under slight pressure or slide away. A dominant dog will rear up or remain still and motionless in a way to communicate that he is about to attack.

Step 2. Directly stare at the dog's eyes. This is a tool that sets off a dog's trigger, but because people do it, we want to check for it. Many dogs will look away or will engage with play barking. The dogs that get very still and begin snarling are the trigger we're looking to classify.

Step 3. Reach underneath a dog's backside. To do this, I start on the back leg and move up toward the inside of the thigh. We covered this in the previous handling section, but I want to re-address it here because a dominant dog will not tolerate it. If a dog becomes fidgety when you move up the inside of his/her leg it is not a dominant dog. Dominant dogs become still or will immediately snap. Be certain that the dog you are assessing is secured and you are able to quickly move away. It is probably best to do this with a savvy dog handler helping you.

Step 4. Remove a toy from a dog's proximity or mouth. Again, another topic that I covered previously, but I want to see the dog's reaction. If you are removing the item from the dog, I suggest you have the dog restrained in a manner that will limit his mobility as you reach in. A better way, depending if one is available, is to use a helper who will be able to pull the dog back and away from you if the dog strikes. Be certain that the person has keen reflexes and the strength to keep the dog from getting to you.

Closed Environment Assessment: This section can be done at the beginning or end of the interaction. I generally use the kennel for this or a corner of the field. I want to see how the dog responds to small areas or confinement. I don't advise this assessment with dogs that have already displayed territorial issues.

The first thing I look for is how the dog will respond to my approaching him when he is in a corner or confined area. Many dogs will dart out and go to another area of the kennel. Others will become very submissive. Still others will posture and make it known that they will attack.

To handle this in a fair manner, it is important to be neutral on the approach and not directly confront the dog – in particular with a dog that is already showing signs of adverse behavior to the environment. If you *storm* the area and the dog reacts and then label the dog as territorially aggressive, it's a highly unfair assessment. We want to see if the dog is truly exhibiting issues about the environment first, and not about our approach to it.

In order to achieve this, we offer the dog a small treat, usually thrown to them. We do not engage in verbal interaction with the dog. If the dog takes the treat and his body language becomes more open, we continue. After a few moments, we approach closer and closer to see at which point the dog becomes responsive to our encroachment. If the dog never becomes open and continues to posture in a fearful or dominant manner, we will try to move the dog to another area of confinement to see if the behavior is specific to his current environment or the overall concept of confinement.

If he is only reactive to his personal environment, we will need to spend some time working him on territorial issues. If it is every area, it is generally an issue of fear, which can be addressed through basic structure training. Dogs that outright attack when you approach their areas are the ones of great concern. This response is generally seen in dogs that were previously *chained*. Retraining *this* is possible, but a bit of work, depending on their level of aggression.

Loud Noise / Startle Response: Loud noises can illicit several reactions in dogs: neutrality, assertion, curiosity or withdrawal. If a dog is easily spooked by loud noises, he may be fearful and may react adversely in stimulating environments. This can include a car backfiring, thunder, slamming doors, dropping an item on the floor, loud music, etc. Also, dogs that become fearful or reactive to loud noises may become spooked. We do not worry if a dog responds through withdrawal: instead we are looking for a heavily skewed reaction such as growling or immediate posturing. A dog may get spooked by a loud noise and pull away, then immediately return in a curious manner. This is a very positive sign.

Many dogs that are used for police work, bite sports; SAR, etc., are generally acclimated to loud noises at an early age. It is important that these types of dogs are neutral to loud sounds because they will encounter them on a regular basis. One of

the most desired responses is a reaction to the initial sound and then a curious, investigative follow up.

To check a dog for this, I do the following:

- When the dog is focused on a toy or a treat, I drop a metal bowl about 2-3 feet away from its head on a cement floor. If there is only grass, I use two bowls and clang them together.
- Slam a kennel door as the dog walks out or walks by.
- As the dog is walking through the kennel, I'll knock something over as he walks by. This can be a broom, a wet floor sign or anything.
- When the dog is focused on someone or something in the area, a loud clap about 2-3 feet behind his head.

It is important that the dog not recognize that the sounds are related to you. When the dog turns toward you, the object (for example, the bowl you dropped) should be out of your hands. If you clanged two bowls together, move them behind your back immediately after making the noise.

This assessment can be repeated a few times with different items and different locations. It is important to note that the *noise assessment* is looking for what is called a *startle response*. All too often, people check dogs for startle response by throwing something at the dog. This is incorrect because it is a direct threat to the dog. The dog should not feel any threat from the item. That is why it is best to have the sound "just happen."

If we see a sharp (or negative) response from the dog, we can move along in the assessment and add another startle test a little later on. On the subsequent noises, the dog should become more accustomed to the sounds and react with less and less surprise.

It is important to remember that there is no failing on this section of the assessment because the dog becomes fearful or jolted by the response. The only negative response is a dog that will turn toward aggression when startled by a sound.

Some people *test* a dog's startle response by poking him when he's not looking. I find this to be unnecessary unless the dog is going to a home with uncontrollable small children, which I don't believe is a suitable home for any dog. It is as unfair as running up behind you and smacking you and seeing what your response is. Behavioral assessments must, above all, be fair.

Other Dogs: Introducing dogs to other dogs is a science in and of itself. Just because a dog reacts negatively to another dog through a cage or fence is no indication that the dog will show this same reaction when the barrier is removed. Also, some dogs display aggression toward other dogs when they themselves are on a leash but will not act aggressively when in a free environment. These indications are generally due to improper socialization and are important things to note during our assessment. It is not a good idea to simply take two dogs and put them together in a yard to put this concept to the test. We strive to introduce two dogs in a fair manner and see their personality.

We should start by understanding that certain dogs will respond in certain ways. Dominant dogs will posture and assume a position. Male to female interaction can elicit a sexual posture. My position is generally to introduce like- sex dogs for basic temperament assessments. The reason for this is, that like-sex fights tend to be the most common and most problematic.

A crucial aspect of the dog-to-dog assessment is that the dog we are evaluating our candidate against should be neutral. If the other dog is high-strung, overly fearful, dominant or very reactive, the assessment is highly unfair. A good neutral dog is hard to find, and once found is worth his weight in gold.

I start the assessment through the fence and always make sure that the person handling the other dog in the yard is competent and able to understand my directions. I also want a person who will follow my direction at a moment's notice and not stall, which could cause serious injury to both dog and assessor.

I will walk through the gate and into the yard, and then go my way while my assistant holds her dog on a stay. I watch my dog for any indication of curiosity. I walk my dog by the other dog a couple of times, and if the other dog is a good helper (not lunging, growling, barking or acting up), I will allow my dog to go over and greet him. I do not let them meet if either or both of them are too excited. I keep my leash loose and ask my assistant to do the same with hers. Again, I only allow this if I see that the dogs are neutral. If they are not, I will walk away and reintroduce. I do not introduce two dogs that are high-strung. The sniffing or introduction lasts only a few moments (a count of 3-5 is often enough). Then I remove my dog or have my assistant remove hers.

When I say *remove* the dog, I do NOT yank them away from each other, as this can create a negative response or experience. This response will be a direct response to the way the dog was removed, *not* a response to the other dog. If all goes well, I will go back over and reintroduce, then move the dogs apart and stroke the other dog's head. I'm looking for a reaction in my dog. I'm looking for neutrality. I will take this as far as feeding them both treats when they are sitting close to each other. I do, however, always assure that I have enough time and space to pull the dogs apart in the event that they become territorial or aggressive. If it is necessary to separate two dogs that are becoming aggressive, it should be done in a firm yet unemotional

manner. There should be no yelling or explaining. The dogs are separated and reintroduced.

I've performed assessments in which I had to reintroduce two dogs 4 to 5 times before they understood that they should get along. In these situations I can put a note on the dog's file that the dog *can* be fine with other dogs if he is introduced properly. There are certain dogs that – even with proper introduction – cannot get along with another dog. Again, this should be noted. Most dogs have no issues with other dogs, if properly introduced. The shelter environment is not the best place to properly introduce two dogs if they have issues.

The most important thing to watch for in dog-to-dog interactions is that the leashes don't get tangled. If they do, you have a major issue. Pulling on tangled leashes is a certain way to get two dogs to engage. Reaching in to separate them while the dogs are engaged is a certain way to get bit. If the leashes get tangled, I will drop my leash, grab a toy or treat and call my dog to me at the same time I ask my assistant to stand still. The faster I can back away, the faster the dog will try to follow. I would suggest that you be extremely careful to avoid leash tangles in the first place, and if they happen, react quickly, with no panic.

Continuing on, I approach the dog we are assessing from the side while he is involved with the other dog. I will touch him and see his reaction. I will poke him gently and see if he will redirect to me; I want to see if he is locked in on the other dog or if his primary focus will come back to me. Some dogs are so focused on other dogs that they prefer the other dogs to their handler. I want to see if I can redirect the dog back to me while he is engaged with the other dog. This is not a pass or fail aspect, but it's a bonus for a dog to prefer the company of his handler to that of the other dog. Don't get your feelings hurt if only one in a hundred dogs redirects to you. Dogs generally prefer the company of other dogs to humans.

After performing these segments – presuming all went well – I will take both dogs with me and walk around the field. I will keep them separated (one on each side of me) and walk around the field and watch their reaction. You should have adequate control of the leashes in the event they cross in front of or behind you. They should be immediately separated and you should continue the walk. It is the rarest of exceptions that will allow me to have both dogs walk on the same side. I can get a good enough indication of the dog's temperament toward each other while walking with them on either side of me.

If the dog does fine on all aspects, there is a strong indication that he will have no issues with any dog that he will meet. It's important to note that dogs may respond differently to unfamiliar handlers. If someone is very skittish of two dogs meeting, they may trigger a response in the dog that is negative and the dog may react differently than he did in our assessment.

Play Group Over Ride: If the dog has been in playgroups and gotten along well, we can forgo this portion of the test. The only concern would be a dog's leash reactivity to other dogs, but if they've played in playgroups, we can note that on the notes and give the dog a green light on their dog reactivity.

Conclusion: As an evaluator, it is our goal to be as fair to the dog we are handling as possible. We should understand that our evaluation is not only important to the dog we are handling, but also to the other dogs that this dog will encounter, as well as to the humans he will meet. We want to give every dog a fair shot at a good life and we don't want to surprise any new dog owners with a situation they are unaware or unable to control.

This part of the assessment is not designed to rule out a dog from potential adoption, but rather to make educated suggestions as to the best home for a particular dog. Also, dogs that display behavioral problems during an evaluation should be made available to animal rescue organizations so that they may rehabilitate them and place them afterwards.

I don't believe in pass or fail tests, if there are rescue organizations available to take dogs that have behavioral issues. After all, that is what rescue is supposed to be for. If after working with qualified trainers a rescue deems the dog should be humanely euthanized because he is just too dangerous, then we can assume the dog has gotten a fair shot.

By drawing some conclusions and gaining a better understanding of dogs before adopting them out, we open the doors to helping more dogs get into better homes. We also lessen the likelihood that dogs will be returned for behavioral issues. The easier we make the placement of easily adoptable dogs, the more time we can spend focused on helping the dogs that need to be rescued.

I also suggest that if people are considering adopting a dog into a home that already has a dog, they should bring their dog to meet the new candidate if the shelter will allow it. This can save a lot of work, aggravation and heartache by watching their initial interaction. Introducing the dog into the home is something that should be done over time, but it is a good idea to see how two dogs will interact upon first meeting. The potential owners should be made to sign a release form to hold harmless the shelter, staff, management, etc., and the family's dog should be current on all vaccinations. If a face-to-face meeting cannot be arranged, it's a good idea to see their interaction through a gate or fence.

This is not a make-or-break introduction, but rather a basic check to see initial reactions. When introducing a new dog into a home, I suggest reading the article on www.boundangels.org entitled "Bringing Home the New Dog."

Closing Thoughts: Assessing a dog's behavior is a talent that is more feeling than technical. I feel that people can learn this skill to some degree, but there are those who are *naturals*. It is always best to have someone who has a natural gift to act as the assessor whenever possible. This guide is designed to help people of any level to better understand canine behavior. All staff, volunteers and management who have interaction with dogs should read it, whether or not they are performing the assessment.

As I mentioned previously, there is an inherent risk of injury in any interaction with any dog. I strongly urge you to take caution. Caution is better than valor – and when in doubt, get **out**. Be smart about your decisions and your opinions when assessing a dog. There are certain dogs that can be rehabilitated and some that cannot. I believe that those dogs that can't be helped are the smallest percentage, but they do exist. It is my goal with this book to open your eyes to better help those that can be saved, and save them.



This document is copyright protected in the US and internationally. Participating shelters and rescue organizations may reproduce this guide for intra-departmental use only and only in printed form. This reproduction is limited to reproduction in its whole form only; no individual parts may be reproduced separately. This document may not be distributed, but you may offer a link to it through your website. It is made available free of charge through Bound Angels.

The BARC app is also available for IOS and Android. A simple way to use the tool and create paperless reports in the field complete with pictures and data.

The supplemental guide “B.A.R.C. Checklist” is available on www.boundangels.org and is recommended to use with this guide.

For more information, please visit www.boundangels.org