

Temperament Testing of Free Roaming Dogs



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What does temperament mean, and how does it differ from behavior, character, and personality?

- Character: is considered the product of the animal's environment and experiences. The behaviours seen are the animal's habits of responding to stimuli. These develop secondary to experiences, a learning history. It is influenced by a changing environment.
- Temperament: the animal's natural or innate responses to its environment, its emotional responses. It is considered stable over time and is the foundation of personality. The character can influence it, but cannot change it.
- Personality: a combination of temperament and character, an animal's overall way of responding to the environment. It is based on past experience and genetic tendencies

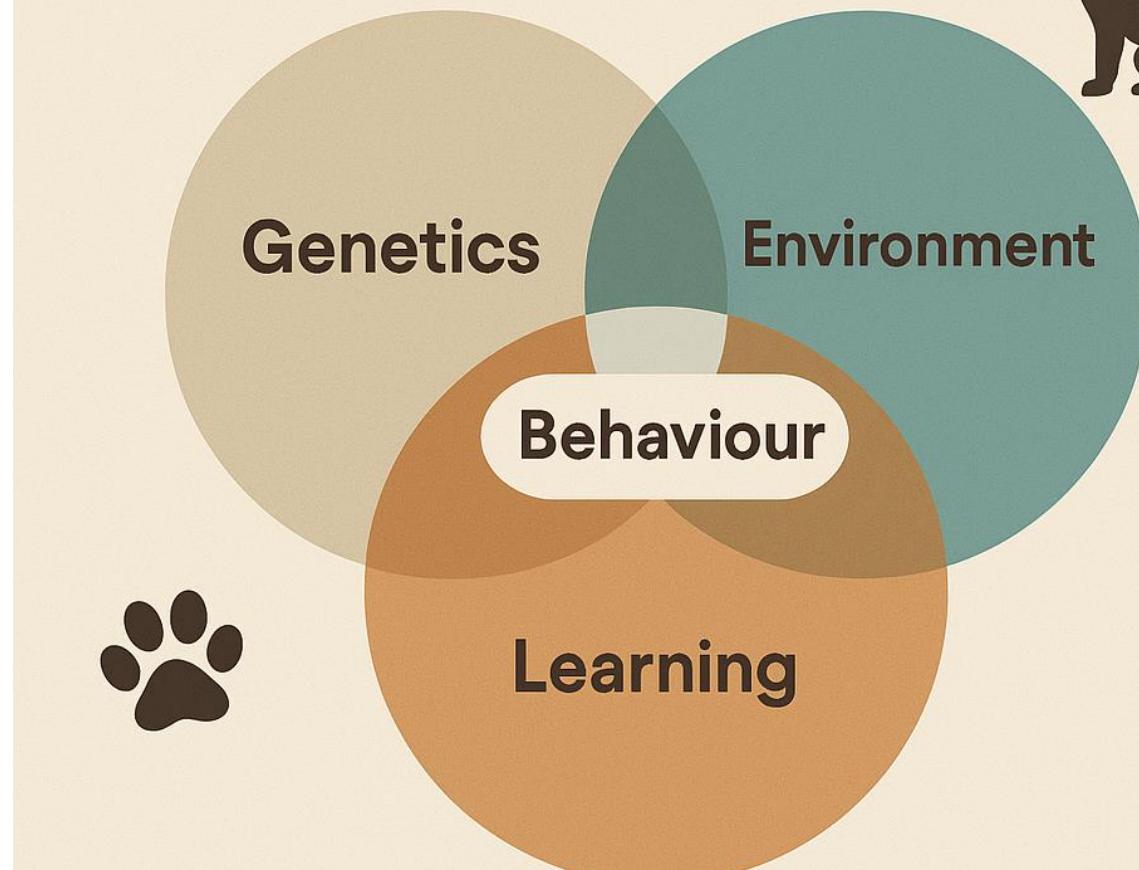


- Genetics: Inherited traits that shape a dog's natural tendencies and predispositions.
- Environment: The surroundings and conditions a dog experiences throughout life, including socialisation, living conditions and interactions.
- Learning: The process dogs acquire new behaviours through observation, experience and conditioning.

Behaviour is the result of the complex interaction between these three factors.

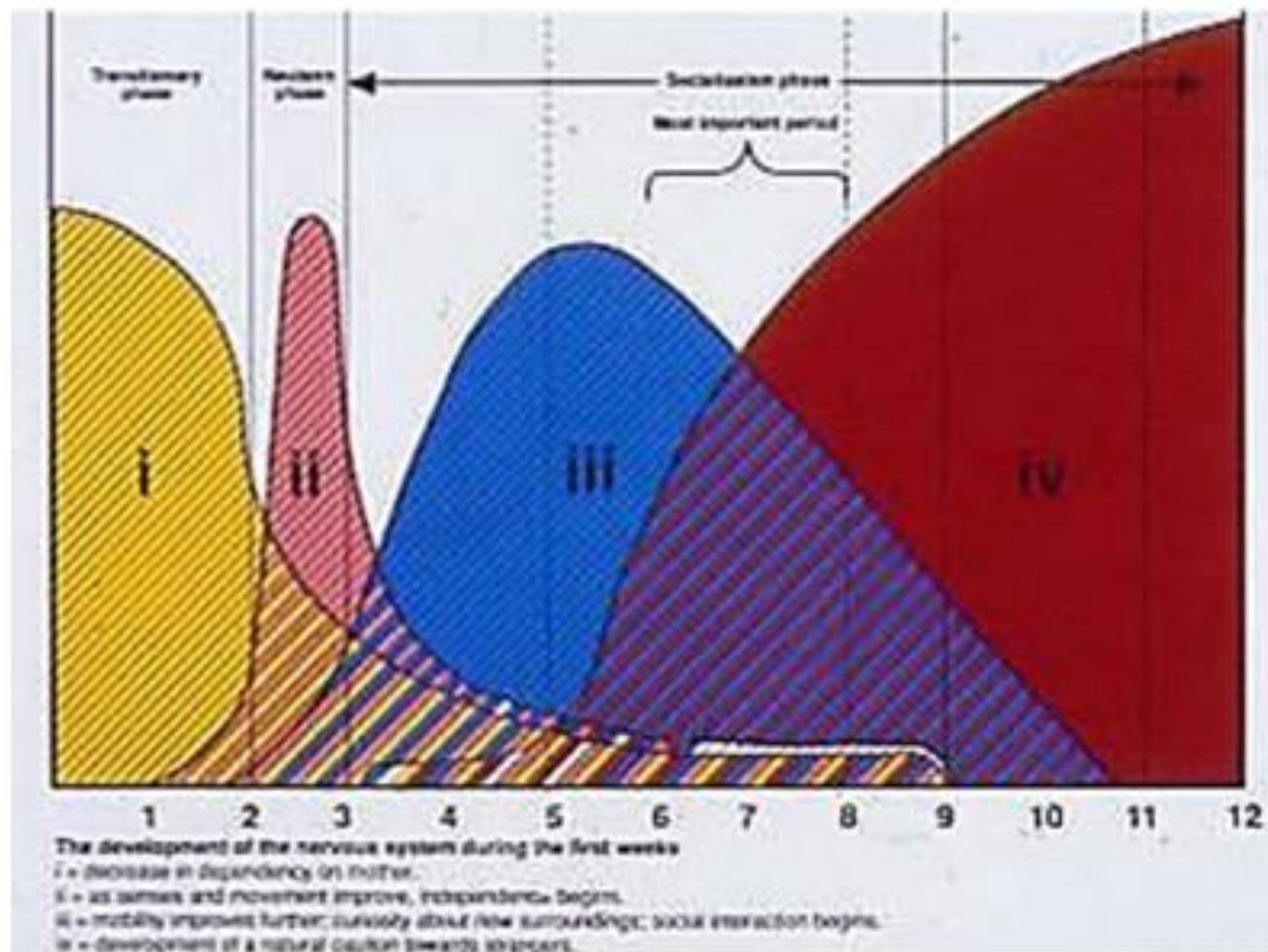
Understanding this interplay helps explain why dogs act the way they do and is crucial for effective temperament testing

The major influences to any behaviour



Socialisation

The way a dog interacts with humans is greatly influenced by early experiences. Specifically, positive exposure to people during the crucial social development period, which typically occurs between 4 and 10 weeks of age, plays a significant role in shaping the dog's behavior.



The Canine Temperament Test



Temperament testing is designed to evaluate an individual dog's temperament through a series of tests that measure traits including:

- Stability
- Confidence
- Shyness
- Friendliness
- Aggressiveness
- Protectiveness
- Prey instincts
- Playfulness
- Defensive behaviour
- Ability to distinguish between threatening and non-threatening situations.

Testing is merely a snapshot of a dog's behaviour at that particular moment. No testing is 100% accurate.

What are we really testing and what are we testing for?



- Recent research has focused on shelters to predict aggression in potential adoptees and identify behavioural issues like separation anxiety and resource guarding, as well as assess dogs' success as working animals.
- A temperament test evaluates a dog's behavioural response to a specific stimulus in a given environment at a particular time, offering a snapshot of its reactions.
- The aim is to use this response to predict how the dog may behave in similar situations in the future, thus assessing its temperament and personality.



All current tests are biased towards pet, or owned dogs, not free-roaming dog populations. Therefore, we need to look at a range of current tests and modify or adapt them for Free-roaming dogs.

Temperament testing of free-roaming dogs could provide a useful indicator for aggression.

This is the only behaviour that would be of interest to municipalities when considering releasing dogs back to the streets.

A Definition of Aggression

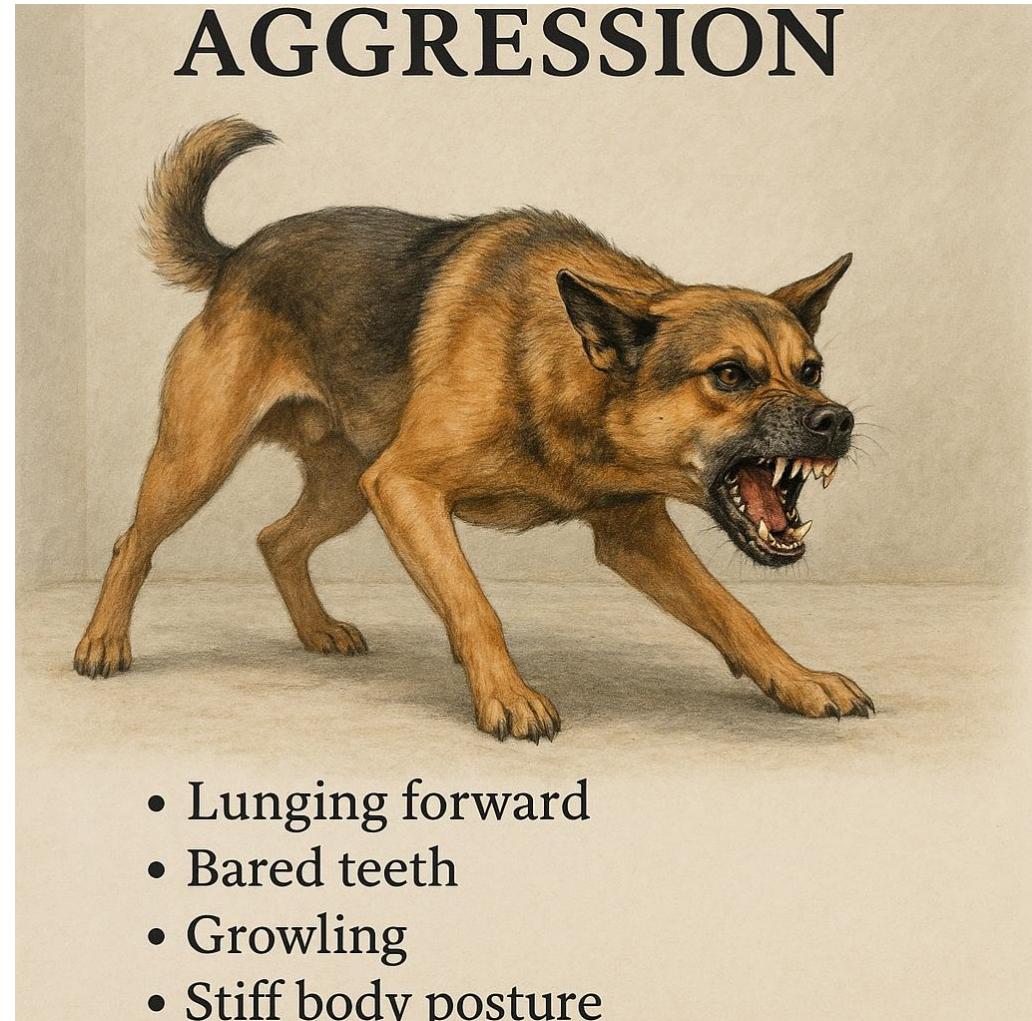
It is an act or threat designed to cause injury.

Display of aggression in dogs can include:-

- Lunging
- Snapping
- Biting

Threat behaviours can include:-

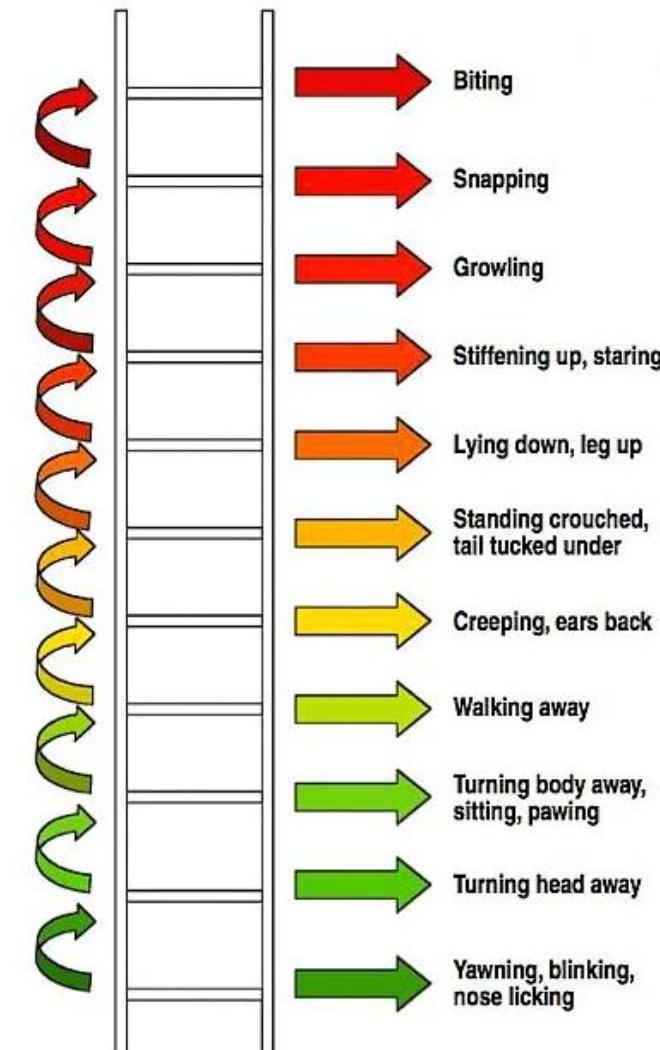
- Freezing
- Staring
- Snarling
- Growling



Canine ladder of aggression

The "Canine ladder of aggression" demonstrates the gradual progression of aggressive behaviour in dogs, beginning with subtle cues like yawning or looking away, increasing through actions such as growling and snapping, and ultimately leading to biting.

Recognising these phases enables handlers and evaluators to identify early signs of aggression, promoting safer and more successful interactions with dogs.



Aggression is Adaptive

- The primary aim of adaptive behaviour is survival.
- To achieve this, an animal must adjust and manage factors that affect its fundamental need to live.
- Animals possess genetic predispositions that guide behaviours essential for survival and environmental control.
- Aggression represents one possible behavioural strategy used to reach this objective.



Two basic categories of aggression

Respondent Aggressive Behavior

This form of aggression is an automatic reaction caused by unpleasant stimuli, such as aggression triggered by pain. It is rarely seen in free-roaming dogs unless they are hurt.

It is often present in dogs subjected to strict or harsh training methods.

Operant aggression

Is a goal-directed behaviour that enables the aggressor to obtain something desirable or to escape from something undesirable. It is more common in free-roaming dogs.



With Operant Aggression there is always reinforcement.

- External reinforcement involves the retreat of perceived threats and/or the retention of desired items.
- Internal reinforcement is characterised by the satisfaction of a drive, leading to a surge of epinephrine (adrenaline junkie).



Learning Behaviours

Dogs acquire knowledge through observation, classical (Pavlovian) conditioning, and operant conditioning, which involves the consequences of their behaviours.

Learning occurs continuously, often without our conscious awareness, as the dog's environment presents a wide range of stimuli and outcomes. It is important to recognise that learning is a complex, non-linear process.



Aggression may serve as a form of defence or as an act of offence

Frustrated or angry dogs may resort to aggressive behaviour to express themselves.

Defensive aggression arises from fear; frightened dogs may defend themselves as a last resort when faced with danger (fight or flight).



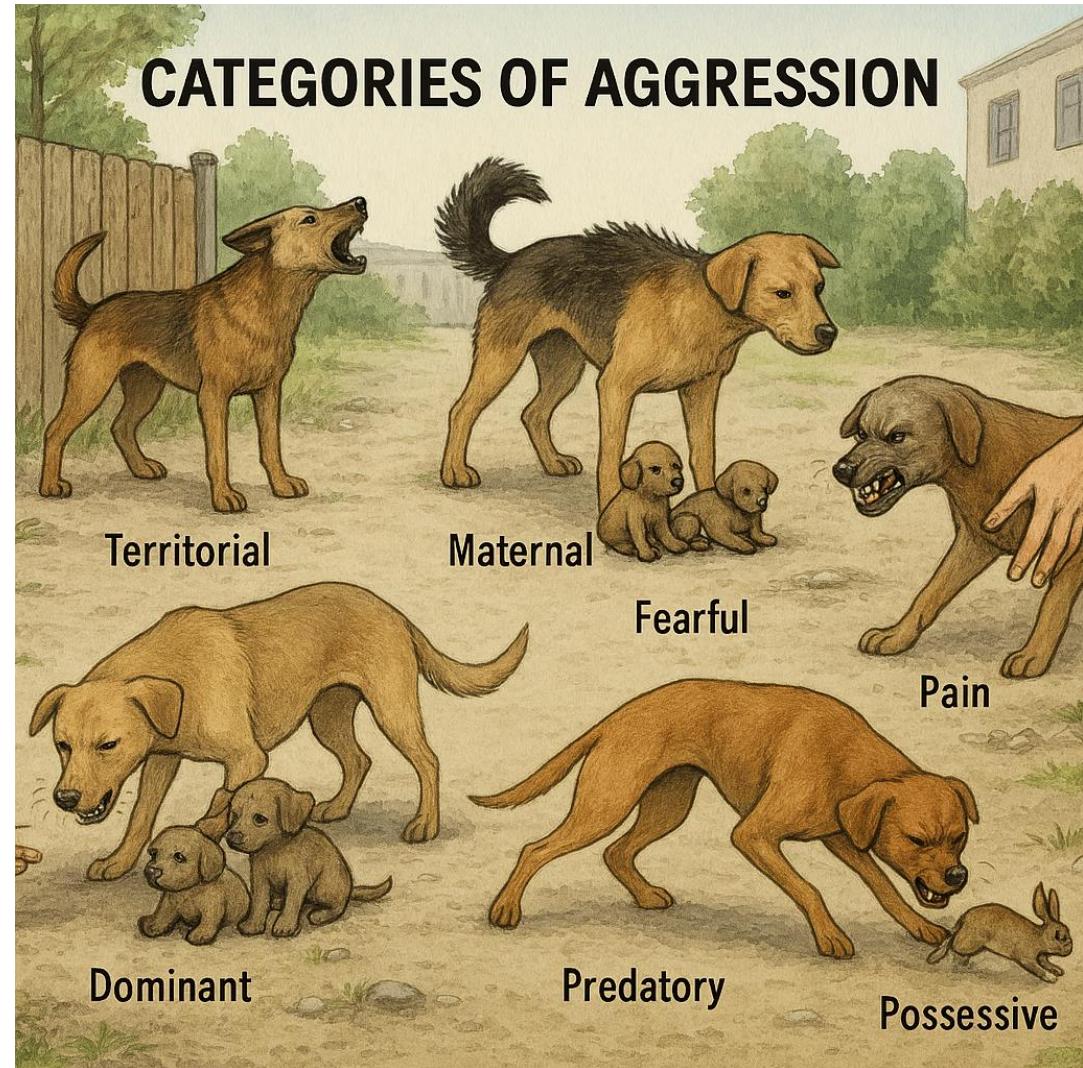
Categories of Aggression

Aggressive behaviour is one of the most common problems encountered in dogs.

There are various types of aggression, and responding to them requires identifying these different forms.

In free-roaming dog populations, the most common types of aggression are often related to fear or a strong predatory drive.

With this in mind, any temperament tests designed for free-roaming dog populations should expose these dogs to potential "triggers."



Triggers

Except in cases of injury or illness, such as rabies, there is no such thing as a consistently "aggressive dog." No dog displays aggressive behaviour continuously throughout the day.

Aggression is always a reaction to stimuli in the dog's environment, which may include human actions, the sudden presence of another dog, pain from injury or illness, among others. These stimuli are known as cues or "triggers."

Triggers can be:

- Specific to location
- Specific to time
- Related to sex (male/female)
- Species-specific
- Object-specific

Current temperament assessments are unable to account for all possible "triggers."



TYPES OF TEMPERAMENT TESTS FOR FREE-ROAMING DOGS



TEST BATTERY



INDIVIDUAL DOG RATING



EXPERT BREED PROTOTYPE RATING



OBSERVATIONAL TEST

Four types of temperament tests have been identified:

1. **Test Battery:** This involves exposing a dog to a range of specific, artificially induced stimuli and recording its reactions.
2. **Individual Dog Rating:** Information about a dog's behaviour and history is collected from an "informant," such as the owner, former owner, handler, or caretaker.
3. **Expert Breed Prototype Rating:** Professionals like veterinarians, trainers, and judges evaluate and describe breeds as a whole, rather than assessing individual dogs.
4. **Observational Test:** The dog is observed in a natural, less controlled setting, and its behaviour is recorded to draw general conclusions. This method is frequently used in selecting service dogs.

Types of test

Socially acceptable behaviour test (SAB test)

Based on C-BARQ questionnaire



Conducted outdoors and takes approximately 15 mins per dog.

Subtest Description

Subtest Description	Presence of the owner
1 Friendly approach by one person who tries to pet the dog with an artificial hand	Yes
2 Exposure to an unfamiliar visual stimulus (e.g. flapping blanket, umbrella opening)	Yes
3 Exposure to an unfamiliar visual stimulus such as silhouette of a giant cat that suddenly appears from behind a screen)	Yes
4 Exposure to an unfamiliar sound (horn)	Yes
5 Exposure to an unfamiliar sound (metal cans behind a screen)	Yes
6 Neutral approach by three persons in a normal way	Yes
7 Neutral approach by three persons in an accelerated way	No
8 Approach by an unfamiliar dog of the same size, different breed and same sex	No
9 Friendly approach by one person who tries to pet the dog with an artificial hand	No
10 Exposure to an unfamiliar sound (bell)	No
11 Exposure to an unfamiliar visual stimulus (umbrella that is opened and closed rapidly)	No
12 Exposure to an unfamiliar visual stimulus (doll in a sledge that is pulled towards the dog)	No
13 Friendly approach by one person who tries to pet the dog with a doll	No
14 Approach by a person who is staring at the dog	No
15 Friendly approach by this same person, who then tries to pet the dog with an artificial hand	No
16 Friendly approach by the owner, who tries to pet the dog with a doll	Yes



If utilising the SAB Test, I would also evaluate the dog for any signs of predatory behaviour.

ASPCA SAFER® Test

(Safety Assessment for Evaluating Rehoming)



This tool is designed to help assess the risk of future aggression and determine the individual behavioural support needed for each dog in a shelter before adoption. The assessment takes place indoors, within a room at the shelter.

1. The tester offers a hungry shelter dog a bowl of food. Once the dog begins eating, the tester removes the food using an “assess-a-hand” to observe if the dog reacts negatively.
2. The tester presents the dog with various toys and chews, then takes them away to monitor for any adverse reactions.
3. The tester applies gentle pressure to sensitive areas of the dog’s body, including the shoulders, sides, and between the toes, to check for negative responses.
4. The tester maintains eye contact with the dog to observe if it triggers any negative reaction.
5. A colleague briefly introduces another dog to evaluate any potential negative behaviour.



1. Dogs should be assessed for aggression during a physical, veterinary, examination which necessitates the dog accepting authority and physical control.
2. The animal should be approached and initially assessed with its usual handler. This may show the handler's degree of control over the animal, and also whether it is inclined to be protective of the handler.
3. The clinical examination itself should be conducted without the current handler.
4. A dog examination must be conducted in a quiet room at the pound or shelter, after the animal has been given time to acclimatise to the room.
5. The dog must be on a leash.
6. If the dog is too excited or distressed in the examination room before the aggression assessment, it should be given more time to settle down in the room. If this is unsuccessful, it should be returned to a kennel and the assessment rescheduled for another day.
7. No other animal should be in the room during the examination, and the only people in the room should be the examining veterinarian and dog handler.
8. The eight-point protocol should be conducted in a friendly and positive way with plenty of stroking and patting, and talking to the dog. There must be no sudden approaches towards the animal or contact with it, if it is unaware that this is to occur.

Assessment Criteria



Any assessment of aggression is partly subjective, but consideration of the following will make the examination more objective.

In each case (a) is acceptable, (b) is borderline, and (c) is unacceptable.

1. How does the animal react at the sight of an unfamiliar person?
 - a) Shows little reaction or shows sociable behaviour
 - b) Growls and barks
 - c) Is overly aggressive.

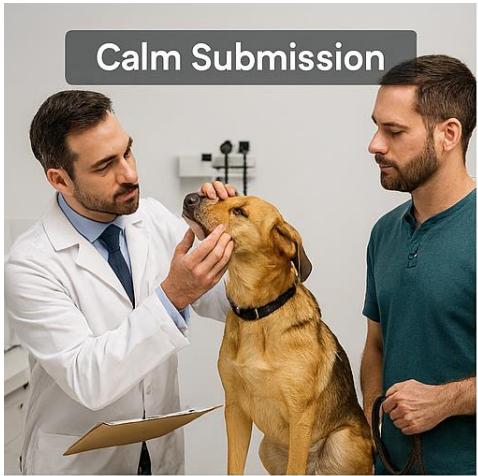
2. On being approached by an unfamiliar person, how does it react?
 - a) Shows little interest
 - b) Withdraws
 - c) Exhibits aggression.



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Assessment Criteria



3. How does the dog react when a hand is passed from the top of the head, to the neck and between the shoulder blades?
 - a) Shows little response or reacts submissively
 - b) Moves away
 - c) Becomes aggressive.

4. During a full clinical examination, the veterinarian should be able to examine an animal from head to tail. How does the dog respond?
 - a) Submits readily to examination
 - b) Is uncooperative
 - c) Becomes aggressive.

5. How does the dog react when the veterinarian attempts to examine its mouth?
 - a) Does not resist
 - b) Attempts to turn and face you
 - c) Becomes aggressive.



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Assessment Criteria



6. How does the dog react when approached from the rear?
 - a) Stands and allows handling
 - b) Attempts to turn and face you
 - c) Becomes aggressive.

7. How does the dog react when its temperature is taken (rectal)?
 - a) Does not resist
 - b) Resists by sitting or turning
 - c) Becomes aggressive.

8. When prolonged eye contact is established between the veterinarian and the animal, how does the animal respond?
 - a) Averts its eye
 - b) Maintains eye contact with no result, or exhibits fear
 - c) Becomes aggressive.



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Assessment Staff



- During all assessments, dogs should be handled by an experienced individual who is not their regular handler.
- Assessment personnel must have received training in canine body language and be able to identify signs of aggression.
- Additionally, staff conducting the assessments should remain confident and unafraid of the dog being evaluated.
- Measures should be implemented to prevent bias arising from anecdotal accounts of the dog's behaviour in the pound or shelter.
- If any assessor develops a negative perception of the dog, they are required to arrange for a replacement before the start of the examination.

Case History: Ashley Heath Shelter UK



Final Thoughts



- No test can guarantee complete reliability.
- An assessment captures only a momentary snapshot of a dog's behavioral tendencies.
- It is nearly impossible to encompass the full range of cues or triggers a dog may have learned.
- Free-roaming dogs likely exhibit fewer aggression cues compared to dogs with owners.
- Observe carefully from the moment you enter the assessment area.
- Pay close attention to subtle body language signals.
- Avoid pushing the dog beyond its comfort threshold.
- If uncertain, consider reassessing in different environments.