

These Testing Mistakes Mean Death for Any Animal That Fails

Life isn't always perfect. But when these testing mistakes mean sure death for an animal, we need to get far closer to perfect than we currently do — because beneath the scars, there's a longing and a hope.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Animal shelters rely on behavioral assessments to determine if dogs are aggressive or fit to be adopted into a family home
- Tests to gauge the effectiveness of these behavioral assessments have yielded conflicting results, including showing they may sometimes incorrectly classify nonaggressive dogs as aggressive
- It's extremely difficult to "test a test," which means there are still many unanswered questions about the accuracy of widely used behavioral assessments
- With proper care and love, even aggressive and fearful dogs can often be rehabilitated
- Some shelters have included temperament testing as a part of the admission process so the previous owners can be included in the process

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 14, 2016.

If you adopted a dog from a shelter, there's a good chance he was given a behavioral assessment before he was deemed adoptable. In shelters, where dogs come from all walks of life, and oftentimes their origins are a complete mystery, such tests attempt to weed out the "good" dogs from the "bad."

Whether or not there are truly any "bad" dogs is a topic for another day, but in the case of a shelter, workers need to decide whether a dog can safely be adopted into a family home.

Will the dog tolerate having its tail pulled by a toddler? Will he become aggressive with other dogs or cats? Will he bite someone who comes in wearing an unfamiliar hat or carrying an umbrella?

These are the types of practical scenarios behavioral assessments attempt to re-create in order to judge the dog's response. A dog's score on these assessments are everything: if he fails, he may be euthanized; if he passes, he gets a chance at having a family.

No test is 100% accurate (especially when administered the stressful environment of an animal shelter), but in these high-stakes situations it's incredibly important that the assessments being used are as reliable as possible.

Researchers are now "testing behavior tests" to determine if they're typically accurate.¹

2 Most Common Behavioral Tests in the US — SAFER and Assess-a-Pet

Your rescued pet was likely given one of two common behavioral assessments, if you adopted him in the U.S. One is SAFER Aggression Assessment, which was created by Emily Weiss, Ph.D. of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

This seven-item assessment takes about 10 minutes per dog to complete and claims to be “a predictive, consistent method for evaluating the probability of canine aggression in individual dogs.”²

Assess-a-Pet is another assessment developed by Sue Sternberg of Rondout Valley Animals for Adoption. It’s a 15-minute evaluation process that claims to reveal a dog’s temperament.

According to the Assess-a-Pet website, “... every exercise in the test, every nuance, has a purpose developed by hundreds of videotaped hours of evaluating dogs, completing adoptions and following up over the course of years.”³

Are Behavioral Assessments Accurate?

With dogs’ lives on the line, Dr. Sara Bennett, once a resident in a shelter behavior program, set out to determine if the results of SAFER and Assess-a-Pet could be trusted.

She asked dog owners to complete a questionnaire called the Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ), which is used to determine a dog’s temperament. Research has previously demonstrated the accuracy of its results.

She then compared C-BARQ scores with dogs’ scores on the other behavioral assessments, with mixed results.

Assess-a-Pet and C-BARQ agreed on classifying dogs as aggressive 73% of the time, but Assess-a-Pet incorrectly classified 41% of nonaggressive dogs as aggressive. The Bark reported:⁴

“... [I]t [Assess-a-Pet] didn’t do very much better than chance, so its utility in making life-or-death decisions is questionable. A test that gives you a 60/40 rather than 50/50 chance of making the right choice would seem to be of marginal value.”

What about SAFER? The Bark explained:⁵

“SAFER did even worse. Its agreement with the C-BARQ was so close to chance that this assessment was determined to be not valid. When the C-BARQ found a dog to be aggressive, SAFER agreed only 60 percent of the time.

And when the C-BARQ found a dog to be not aggressive, SAFER agreed only 50 percent of the time; there was a 50/50 chance that a safe dog would be recognized as such.”

Difficulties with Gauging a Dog’s Aggression in Shelters

It’s extremely difficult to “test a test,” which means there are still many unanswered questions about the accuracy of widely used behavioral assessments.

Further research by Bennett and colleagues have brought up additional issues as well, such as the fact that dogs' behavior often changes drastically once they become acclimated to the shelter.

Testing a dog on its first day in the shelter may therefore give a very different result than testing the dog on day three, for instance. Further, some dogs may never fully acclimate to the shelter yet would thrive in a home environment.

A study of SAFER published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science concluded that the ideal time to test a shelter dog (at intake or on day three) is unknown, adding:⁶

“Until the ideal time to test can be identified, it should be based on the individual dog's welfare status, and testing of dogs showing severe stress should be avoided.”

The problem is that for the vast majority of dogs in shelters there is constant stress, making an “ideal” time for testing impossible. Some shelters have included temperament testing as a part of the admission process so the previous owners can be included in the process.

Can Aggressive Dogs Be Rehabilitated?

The other issue with behavioral assessments is what to do with dogs that are identified as aggressive. Many times such dogs can be rehabilitated, but whether or not they get the chance often depends on the shelter's available resources.

It's important to remember that dogs arrive at animal shelters traumatized, physically and/or emotionally. As a result, the dogs are often fearful of people and may have never even been touched regularly, much less socialized to other animals or common life experiences (such as mastering the art of climbing stairs).

Their fear may manifest as aggression, and so the dogs cannot be adopted out until they learn how to get along with people and other dogs.

Every dog will deal with this stress differently, but even in the case of severely abused dogs, such as those who have been starved, beaten, abandoned or deprived of social contact, there is often a loving family pet waiting beneath the scars. Fortunately, rehabilitation centers for abused dogs are popping up across the U.S.

At the ASPCA's NYC rehab center, animal behaviorists work closely with individual dogs and the center has unique features to make dogs feel calmer (like soundproofing, light dimmers and calming scents and music — a far cry from a typical shelter's loud noise and concrete enclosures).

Part of the reason this no-kill shelter has such an awesome adoption rate is because there are lots of adequately trained animal behaviorists and positive trainers volunteering their time with the dogs arriving at the shelter to address behavior issues as they are identified.

Unfortunately, not all shelters have instituted such rigorous training programs so not all abused or unsocialized dogs will get the chance to be rehabilitated.

You may have had your own experience adopting a shelter dog and finding that he still suffers some “behavioral baggage” that came along with him, requiring you to engage the services of positive dog training techniques to address the issues. Complicated behavior problems may require the services of a veterinary behaviorist.

If you are considering adopting a shelter dog, a program called A Sound Beginning was designed to help rescue dogs and their adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond. Instituting some of their suggestions before your pet arrives home is one of the best ways to facilitate a peaceful and positive transition during those first few critical weeks of laying the groundwork for an awesome relationship.

Sources and References

^{1, 4, 5} [The Bark \(Archived\)](#).
² [ASPCA, SAFER \(Archived\)](#).
³ [SueSternberg.org \(Archived\)](#).
⁶ [J Appl Anim Welf Sci. 2015;18\(2\):153-68](#)
