



Adoptions

Behavior Assessments: How and Why We Use Them

Have you ever looked at a dog available for adoption and wondered how you can trust that that particular dog will be a safe new member of the family?

Physical appearance and breed aren't major factors when you're considering a dog's temperament and sociability with people and other animals so how does the San Diego Humane Society (or any animal welfare agency) accurately evaluate the behavior and temperament of a dog?

Just as we use [medical examinations](#) to evaluate the health of every animal in our care, the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA uses Behavioral Assessments to evaluate the behavior of every dog in our care. A Behavioral Assessment (or BA) is a standardized method of assessing a dog's temperament and we use this information to help make the best pet matches possible and set dogs up for success in their new homes. **The Behavioral Assessment process has helped contribute to our success in building a 90 percent adoption rate for all animals that come into our care and a three to four percent adoption return rate.**

Behavior Assessment Steps

The BA consists of several steps in which a dog is placed in a series of "real life" situations. By placing an animal in these situations, the assessment can reveal behaviors that otherwise would not be displayed in the normal day-to-day shelter setting, but would possibly be expressed in normal home situations.

To give them time to acclimate to their new environment, dogs are generally assessed several days after arriving at the Humane Society (though there are times that a dog may be given more time or be reassessed if he appears to need more time to adjust).

Teams of two or more Humane Society staff members trained to perform BAs handle the dogs during the assessments and record the sessions on videotape and in type. An assessment may take from fifteen to forty-five minutes or longer, depending on the individual animal and his responses and behaviors.

The assessment consists of several steps as listed below (the following list of steps are in no way a "how to guide" for administering a behavior assessment, this information is provided for information only). The dog's behavior during each of these steps is observed and noted as part of the BA.

Step 1 - SCAN (Social, cautious, aroused and no signs of friendliness): This first step is to evaluate the dog's initial sociability.

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Step 2 - Stroke And Head Pat: Without any verbal communication to the dog, the handler strokes the dog from head to base of tail.

Step 3 - Sitting With and Without Affection: The handler sits down and observes the dog's behavior. If after 5 seconds or so the dog has not come to the handler for attention, the handler verbally communicates with the dog in a friendly tone and provides physical attention for 20 seconds.

Step 4 - Teeth Examination: This step evaluates how the dog responds to what may be an unpleasant situation. The handler attempts to examine the dog's teeth 5 times for 5 seconds each time.

Step 5 - Hug Test: If the handler feels it is safe to continue, he/she hugs the dog using a "safe hug" technique. The handlers evaluate whether the dog accepts or withdraws from the hug; in some cases the dog may nip or lunge.

Step 6 - Toy, Food, Treat and Resource Test: This step addresses the dog's tolerance and aggression concerning treats, food and toys, or anything the dog may consider a "treasure."

Step 7 - Stranger Approach Test: This step evaluates how a pet will react to a door knock, a stranger entering the home with a forward stance, and direct (but not hard) eye contact with the dog. Testers look for behaviors such as fear, playfulness or aggression.

Step 8 - Baby: Dogs are tested to see how they react to a fake baby which cries and moves.

Step 9 - Cat: Dogs are tested to see how they react to a dog-savvy Behavior Assessment cat.

Step 10 - Dog: Dog to dog introductions are completed to see how they react/respond to other dogs of different sex, age, and size.

Based on the results of the BA the dog will either be placed into the adoption program, transferred to an animal welfare partner which is breed-specific, returned to the owner (at owner's request), or considered for euthanasia.

Unfortunately, during their BAs some dogs may display behaviors that make them unhealthy (i.e. unsafe for the community). These dogs become candidates for euthanasia and their cases are handled in accordance with the Humane Society's [Euthanasia Policy](#).

If you have any additional questions on the Humane Society's Behavioral Assessments, feel free to contact any of the following:

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