

# **Saving Dogs in Shelters**



**TOMPKINS COUNTY**  
**SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS**



To save dogs in shelters, particularly dogs with “behavior issues,” we need to understand and address that the most fundamental problem is not the dogs (although they are the issue), it’s not irresponsible owners (although they contribute greatly), it is the shelter environment itself.

While shelter humane education programs highlight dogs’ social nature and discuss the importance of giving them stimulating environments, it would be difficult to design a more frustrating environment for a dog than a kennel. Most humane societies and SPCAs keep dogs alone in extremely barren environments virtually around the clock, with some tantalizing visual access to the outside world. This low-stimulation situation is then punctuated by the passing of people and other dogs—they are always visible but cannot be investigated. The dog’s urge to meet and investigate is repeatedly frustrated. With repetition, the sight of dogs and/or people becomes associated, through classical conditioning, to the feelings of frustration and agitation. When the dog finally has the opportunity to meet, his behavior is over the top. This is off-putting to potential adopters who are likely to label a dog “hyperactive” or unmanageable rather than see the dog’s

behavior as driven by the abnormal context.



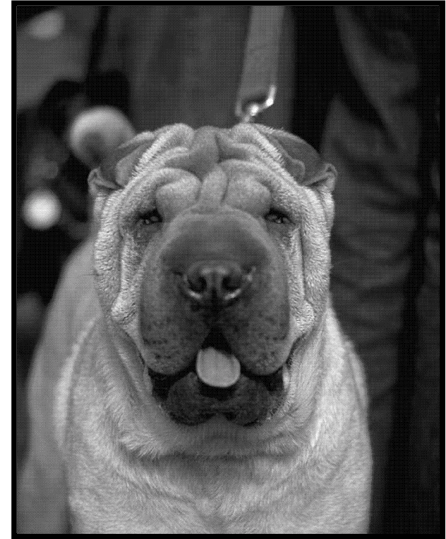
What is to be done? To address the shortcomings of the shelter itself, there are many things a shelter can do: daily walks, clicker and/or obedience training, regular dog-dog free play, food delivery enrichment strategies, and training efforts directed at the dog’s particular behavior problems.

By implementing a fairly simple in-house behavior program, shelters can be well on their way to saving even more lives.

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## Temperament Testing

Temperament testing is a series of exercises designed to test for aggression. It requires skill and training, and greatly depends on the environment in which the test is conducted, so if it is not done correctly, it can result in dogs being wrongly destroyed. The dog's own biology requires him to respond in one of three ways to unwanted stimuli: retreat, growl, or bite. The dog cannot say "leave me alone, I'm tired and lonely and scared." A dog may appear aggressive, but in reality simply be frightened by his new surroundings and by being away from the only owner he has ever known. Being able to determine which can mean the difference between life and death.



Two days after a dog arrives at the TC SPCA, the dog goes through an initial temperament test. If the dog shows signs of aggression, the dog is extensively retested two days later. If the dog again shows signs of aggression, the staff member must present the Executive Director with a detailed report, usually three to four pages long, with a one to two page narrative. At that time, a veterinarian from the Cornell University School of Veterinary Medicine Behavior Department will be consulted on the case and come to the shelter (or the dog will go to Cornell) for retesting by a veterinarian Board Certified in Behavioral Medicine. The DVM will then (1) re-evaluate the dog; (2) rule out a medical origin for the behavior; and (3) either pass the dog, recommend a course of rehabilitation or recommend the dog be killed. After that evaluation is received, the Executive Director will discuss the issue with Cornell and SPCA dog training staff, then make the final determination.

All TC SPCA staff who have contact with shelter dogs have received training by Cornell Behaviorists in rehabilitation, testing, and interaction with dogs that show aggression.

## In-Shelter Socialization

You don't need a Ph.D. in dog behavior to start a simple, yet highly effective program to keep dogs happy and mentally healthy. Shelter staff and volunteers can handle all of the activities described below.

- Daily walk on a leash. Use Halti- or Gentle Leader-type face harnesses for dogs who have problems with strong leash pulling.
- Daily off-leash play in a fenced area.
- Daily in-kennel socialization including brushing, petting, and just hanging out with the dog. Positive interactions such as these help the dog associate good feelings with his kennel.

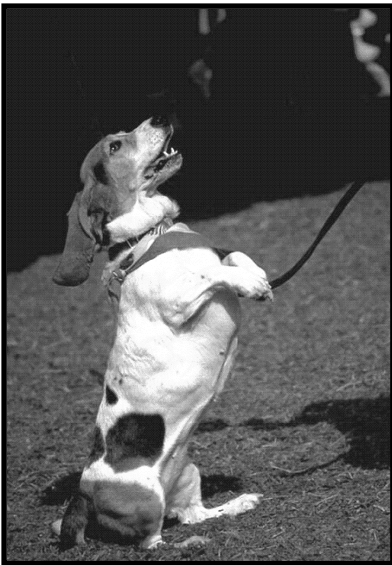
- Daily dog-dog play outside the kennel.
- Rudimentary behavior training (clicker training, teaching to sit, fetch, etc.)

As your volunteers and staff work with the dogs, have them record daily observations in a computer or handwritten log. Note things like activity level, ability to follow simple commands, favorite games or toys, interaction with other dogs, and any progress made or problems noticed. This information comes in handy for the next socializer, and is particularly helpful when matching the dog with a new adopter.



## Stimulation

- Just like people, dogs benefit from a change in visual environment now and again. Rotate dogs in kennels every day so they move into a different kennel—which provides a new view—and they have different neighbors to investigate.
- Use meal time to stimulate mental and physical activity: some dogs can benefit from having some of their food delivered via Kong toy. This helps them focus on something besides their kennel situation, and provides a mental challenge.



## Going Cage Crazy? Special Needs?

Use a foster home to give a dog a break from the shelter. You can still promote the dog as available for adoption on your website, adoption referral websites such as Petfinder and I-800-Save-A-Pet, and photos at the shelter.

Shy or fearful dogs can also benefit from time in a foster home where they can get comfortable with different people or situations. But you can also help shy and fearful dogs in the shelter. The most common types of fears are social shyness, situational fears, and fears of certain noises. Generally, the best way to handle these cases is to begin with a very mild exposure combined with a fun or positive association. Over time, the

exposure can be increased until the dog is comfortable. Using this technique combined with time in a foster home, we have rehabilitated (and found loving homes for) dogs who were fearful of men, noises, stairs, and even a dog terrified of everyone and everything.

## **Keep Dogs in Good Homes**

Prevent conflicts over behavior issues through good matchmaking techniques. Match potential adopters with dogs by focusing on lifestyle. With information gathered from your temperament test and daily socialization logs, introduce active-lifestyle adopters with active dogs, people in quiet households to sedate dogs, etc.

## **Working With Volunteers**

Since socialization is crucial for dogs in shelters, it is important to have volunteers who understand that the animals are relying on them. At the TC SPCA, we require dog walkers to sign up for particular days and times, and they must call in if they cannot make their appointed shift. If they do not show up for their scheduled shift three times, they are dropped from the program.

Volunteers—and therefore your dogs—also benefit from training. Work with local dog behaviorists, trainers, and fanciers to offer short classes on dog behavior to your volunteers. Bring back information you learn at conferences, and buy books on humane dog training and lend them to volunteers.

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## **Dog fact sheets from the Tompkins County SPCA**

- Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Dog
- What Dogs Want
- Off-Leash Dog Parks
- Kong is King
- Ten Steps to Doggy Bliss
- Choke and Shock Collars
- Puppy Development
- House Training
- Barking
- Helping the Shy or Fearful Dog

