

An excerpt from

Assessing Aggression Thresholds in Dogs

Chapter 1—Assessing Aggression Thresholds: An Overview

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The protocols I recommend in this book include a series of tests designed to determine a dog's aggression thresholds. These tests have for years been labeled under the name Assess-A-Pet (AAP) which have been updated and revised to better match today's shelter dogs and adopters. Temperament and behavior evaluations such as this help shelters determine which dogs are safe and appropriate for adoption or transfer, and which are too risky or downright dangerous to place back into the community. The temperament and behavior of each dog, rather than breed type, length of stay, or random, subjective decisions, should guide decisions about placement, transfer and euthanasia.

AAP measures aggression thresholds. The most successful pet dogs are ones with high aggression thresholds. Dogs with low aggression thresholds are not only at increased risk for aggression problems in the home, but just as often for more problematic behavior in the home, and more severe problem behaviors, even seemingly unrelated behaviors like separation anxiety, severe destructiveness, barking problems, reactivity and more.

AAP was specifically created by and for people evaluating and handling dogs in shelters, but can also be used by trainers and others who work with dogs in other environments. AAP assumes, and takes into account, the stressful and arousing nature of a shelter and kenneling. It does not penalize a dog for coming out of his kennel in an aroused state. Indeed, AAP assumes that shelter dogs have experienced a period of frustration, arousal, overstimulation, deprivation and stress. The test is also designed to take into account the experiences particular to shelter dogs and to measure their responses. The responses you are looking for do not necessarily look like what you expect from an owned dog already settled in a home, nor are you looking always for overt aggressive responses.

The steps of AAP unfold in a specific order, each one building on the one before it. The test is deliberately laid out in this order not just to keep the tester safe, but to maximize each dog's potential for success.

The benefits of AAP:

- Allows shelter personnel, trainers and rescue personnel to interact more safely with dogs
- Allows you to better describe the dog's personality and temperament to prospective adopters
- Allows a trainer or staff person at a shelter to tailor training to each dog's strengths and weaknesses
- Helps the shelter determine where best to house/kennel each dog
- Allows shelter workers or trainers to counsel prospective adopters about potential behavior or training problems and ways to avert trouble
- Helps shelter workers or volunteers better understand and counsel people considering surrendering dogs, including those who may be dealing with difficult or even dangerous dogs
- Allows shelters to determine which dogs cannot safely be offered to the public
- Allows shelters to determine which dogs cannot safely be handled by volunteers
- Allows a shelter to provide whatever an adoptable dog needs to find a permanent, loving and appropriate home—whether that might be time, remedial care/treatment, behavior modification or transfer to a rescue group or another shelter with more adopters
- Allows a shelter to help keep their community safe, and to place out into society pet dogs that are safe, appropriate and successful—dogs that keep the rest of the humans, dogs and cats in the community safe from harm
- Can help a shelter make informed decisions that promote a more humane society

Sue Sternberg has devoted her personal and professional life to helping dogs and people live together happily. Sue is known internationally for developing testing procedures to improve the odds of successful dog adoptions. When home in Utah, Sue enjoys competing in dog sports with her two heeler mixes, playing fiddle and scouring the desert for dinosaur fossils as an amateur paleontologist.