



Kennel Syndrome

Often times people adopt dogs from shelters or humane organizations and base their opinions on what they see at the shelter as to the dogs overall personality / temperament. You see a calm, sweet dog at the shelter, and you think he will be a sweet and submissive dog once you get him home.

I have evaluated, adopted / placed, facilitated the rescue of and performed behavioral assessment tests on hundreds of dogs, from the most aggressive to the most submissive. One thing I can attest to is that a dogs true personality will often times be brought out once the dog is in a neutral environment, not at a shelter. Shelters are far from neutral. The energy of a shelter is completely overwhelming to most dogs. This energy does one of two things to a dog: Fight or flight. Many dogs will completely shut down in this situation, others will act out in response. I call this **Kennel Syndrome**.

Kennel Syndrome is the behavior that a dog assumes in survival mode. That means dominant or aggressive dogs can turn sweet and submissive in order to get the food or shelter they need to survive, as well a submissive dog may turn dominant in order to gain respect or shelter. Dogs are masters of opportunity and have survived as a species thousands of years because of their adaptability.

There are often several aspects that relate to a dog landing in a shelter. Its owners either abandoned the dog to the street, he ran away and was not found or he was dumped there. Needless to say, there are very few truly feral dogs in the shelter system. That means a dog that was more than likely very socialized with humans, living in a human world, living inside, climate controlled, socialized with other people, etc. suddenly finds its whole world turned upside-down. When this dog lands in the shelter, all of this is ripped away from him. He either ends up there because the owners got sick of him, couldn't afford him, he got sick, aggressive (term used lightly), or a few other reasons. Whatever the reason, more likely than not, it was not the dogs fault. One thing for certain is that the dog that ends up in the shelter is confused and looking to make sense or solution from what he is facing.

The things a dog experiences in the shelter are for the most part a huge shock to his system. It's like putting a human in a maximum-security prison. There is little if any human interaction in shelters. If there is it's through the steel bars that house the dog.

Several behaviors that are a part of *Kennel Syndrome* can include the following:

Cage fighting: Dogs that are kept in eyesight of dogs across the way will start to get into and out of drive. By keeping this dog from ever getting to the dog across the way, it may foster aggressive behavior. Play barking, can shift into defensive barking, “don’t come over here.” And, since the dog cannot ever get to the other dog, the more aggressive dog feels as if he’s winning. Then, when the other dog is finally released from his cage and walks nearer the stronger dog, the stronger dog is highly likely to become protective to the territory he’s been protecting all along: Cage fighting stems from a territorial dominance, which is a self-protective aspect of survival. The more often this is re-enforced, the stronger the behavior will become. This carries over to a dog seeing other dogs walking by his kennel. If the person walking the dog by stops for a moment and the dog in the kennel barks and growls, the threat is immediately removed, further re-enforcing the behavior.

An example of this in the real world is a dog that barks at a passing stranger. Each time the dog barks, the person always goes away. This dog is learning that “his barks are what’s making the person go away.” He learns that as he barks, that what he’s barking at is moving away, so he’s in control. If at some point, this stops working, the dog will take the behavior to the next level, which will be charging toward the person. If the charging then disperses the intrusion, he will continue that behavior... until, at some point it will turn to nipping, biting and eventually attacking. The more often that the “threat” is removed by an action of the dog, the more the dog’s negative behavior is re-enforced. Dogs that have territorial issues must be taught that they are safe in the environment they are protecting without their needing to act out, and that people coming into that area are not there to do them harm. This is a technique that must be taught by someone who understands canine behavior and one that has the ability to be fair yet firm to the dog.

Emotional shut down: These are dogs that are completely turned off to the world. Examples of this are dogs that freeze and lay on the floor when someone wants to take them for a walk, cowering in the corner when someone comes in, tails between the legs, hunched over posture, etc. These dogs can be strong or weak dogs: there is no indication of the true personality that can be seen here, what we see is where the dogs’ emotions landed him. It’s similar to a powerful man crying in a corner. He may be acting weak, but physically he can still be quite strong. These dogs need to be re-socialized through gradual exposure. Just the presence of a person near them, even if this person is doing nothing (in fact it’s much better that the person do nothing) will start to teach the dog that having a person close to him has no negative implications. In this situation I strive for neutral lessons over positive lessons. The key to understanding this is quite complex for humans, but positive lessons as seen by a human may confuse the dog. For example: offering food to a dog in this state may make the dog move quickly for the food, which in turn may surprise the person and make him (the person) jump. The jumping reaction of the person can shock the dog and we know where that will land us. Just a few minutes of a person’s energy in the immediate area of the dog is often the best solution to re-socialize the dog.

Spinning: This high-energy behavior is a clear sign of lack of stimulation both physical and mental. It's most common in working class dogs; those are dogs that require activities to keep them busy and/or stimulated. Spinning dogs start by walking around in circles in their cell, and, the more they walk around, the more they turn. The turns are then succeeded by jumps, until eventually the jumps and spins bind together to form a behavior that looks like the dog is bouncing off of the walls. Once a dog gets into this mode it often leads to an obsessive compulsive, self-fulfilling behavior that can be difficult to cure.

Cage chewing: Dogs that chew at the bars of the cage are obviously fighting to get out and are often high strung. The behavior can lead from trying to escape to an obsessive-compulsive behavior that will take a lot of work to break. This behavior also causes serious permanent damage to dogs' teeth, jaws, and depending on the construction of the kennels, often to the dogs' intestines if paint and steel is ingested. Dogs that chew, or try to chew out of enclosures are often times dogs that have been forced into enclosures and punished there. If the experience is a bad one, the dog sees it as a place he needs to escape from. This goes against the instincts of a dog, which, as a breed, has little problem being enclosed in an area such as a den.

Overall Destructive Behavior: This can range from tearing up bedding to self-destructive behavior such as biting at limbs until they bleed. As with many of the other behaviors I describe here, this behavior can become obsessive-compulsive. The first symptoms can be seen in the dog looking for attention and when none is found they regress into a corner and start licking or obsessively chewing. Since most of this behavior will take place when there is no one around, it's challenging to pinpoint. Although this stems from boredom, it often surpasses a mere past time and becomes overwhelming in the dog's mind. Keeping more than one dog in a kennel at one time can often prevent these behaviors. Dogs are creatures that form strong bonds. Dogs that are left alone often times will turn destructive or anti-social. Many shelters do not place more than one animal in a run because of their fear that the dogs may fight. Although this may be true, it's a bad excuse. Millions of animals are killed in shelters for lack of space and behavioral issues such as destructive behaviors that can be easily prevented by simply spending some time in introducing dogs that can be placed together.

Outwards signs of aggression: These dogs are the surest to be killed first in the shelters, as they are a risk and are the least likely to get adopted. This evaluation is done immediately when a dog shows any sign of outwardly aggression toward a human. Since it takes time to properly evaluate why a dog is acting aggressive, and shelters lack time and staff to do this, the dogs are more easily killed and done away with. Oftentimes dogs that show aggression are doing so out of fear instead of dominance. If a dog is afraid, he is likely to snap, growl or bite. If the person handling the dog is not able to make the dog feel secure or properly control or correct him, the behavior may become dangerous.

Food aggression: Dogs in shelters are fed once a day, and believe me it's not the most nutritious meal or the largest portions. Keep any animal hungry enough and they will

start to fight for food. It doesn't matter if it's a Mastiff or a Canary. An animal's survival instincts force it to fight for the sustenance to stay alive. It's a kill or be killed attitude.

Many shelters and rescue organizations have implemented the use of temperament and behavioral assessment tests on dogs to see what their overall constitution is. The problem with many of these tests is that they are highly unfair to the dogs. These tests are often performed by people who have been "shown" these techniques (and not understand them) and therefore lack an understanding as to how to read the results objectively. Many people who apply these tests have no idea whatsoever as to what the results mean if they deviate slightly from the answer they are looking for on their paper. A dog may act aggressively the first time his tail is touched because he was surprised, but once he understands that no harm will come to him, he will let his guard down and allow his tail to be pulled and touched. Dogs may have a negative reaction to a poke on his hind quarter, but not a stroke. Dogs growl and play bark, and often times growling is read as growling which has a negative implication.

A huge part of these tests are the location where they are performed, who is performing them, the mood of the dog when the test is being performed, as well as several other things. Dogs are often times very contextual. There is a simple test to prove this, teach your dog a new trick in your living room, then take him to the park and see if he will perform the trick the exact same way the first time in the park as he did at home. Where a dog is, and what his surroundings are, has a huge impact on how a dog will relate to an outside stimulus. A very dominant, strong person can bring a much different behavior from a dog as a person who is nervous. That being said, I may be able to pull a dog's tail without getting bit, but a small child might get bit. Temperament testing is at best a marginal snapshot at the true personality of a dog at that given moment. A true behavioral assessment can only be ascertained by spending a good amount of time with the dog and addressing each aspect of the test in various ways and through various conditions.

Testing for food aggression is one of the stupidest things humans apply in testing dogs and in humanizing them. Countless dogs have been killed for this idiotic, unfair, humanized test. If a dog is eating, he should not be bothered. NEVER. If parents are too stupid to keep children away from a dog that is eating, they should not have dogs, let alone children. Once the food hits the bowl and the bowl is set in front of the dog, the food belongs to the dog. I cannot think of one good reason why I should have to reach my hand into the dog's bowl. If a qualified trainer wants to work to overcome the dog's natural instincts to protect its meal, there are a few techniques that I have taught and seen applied by qualified trainers that work. However, testing a dog to see if he will growl or snap at a rubber hand is downright STUPID. I won't go into my litany of how this may be the dumbest test ever invented, but I would strongly argue to anyone, that testing a dog for food aggression using this technique has no bearing on a dog's true behavior toward territorial dominance or resource guarding.

I've seen shelters test dogs for aggression by giving them a toy in the shape of a tug and pulling on the tug to see if the dog will growl. If the dog growls, and is of a "dominant

breed,” the dog goes down. The flaw in this test is that its as stupid as punching a man in the nose to see if his eyes water, and then stating that if his eyes water from a punch in the nose, he’s weak because he’s crying.

It’s a dog’s natural instinct to growl when a game of tug is initiated. And, for people that do not know anything about dogs’ instincts, dogs don’t let go when you pull on an object. Instead it further enforces the fight behavior and the dog grabs the object tighter. Games of tug should not be used to test a dog for aggression if the only quantifiable result is posed as *growling = aggression*.

The overall point I am trying to make in this article is that a dog’s behavior is molded by his surroundings and his history. If you bring a dog home knowing nothing about his history and give him free reign of your home and your life and you tell everyone, “He’s so sweet, he was abused and I’m gonna love him forever,” get ready for a big let down. When you bring a new dog home, give him structure and training, have him work for the rewards he’s gonna get. The dog you bring home from the store, shelter, or a rescue group is often not the dog that you’ll have living with you in 6 months. You will create the dog that you will be living with. There is an article I wrote on bringing the new dog home, I suggest everyone to read this article to give you a glimpse of what you’re up against in bringing a new dog home.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:
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