

Evaluating Temperament Testing  
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Formal temperament testing prior to adoption is a growing aspect of dog rescue. I grow concerned when a rescue wants me to determine a dog's suitability for adoption in a short period. How can I accurately do this? What test should I use, if any? Do tests honestly evaluate temperament? There are so many kinds of temperament tests out there, some very basic and others using various gadgets to try to mimic situations a dog will be put into. Let me share my views of temperament testing. Before I can do this, I must acknowledge the difference between temperament and behavior.

What we call a dog's behavior is part hereditary and part what we do with it. Temperament is what nature gives us to work with based on complex genetics. Behavior is what we do with the given temperament. Some things called behaviors, also called drives, breed traits, etc., are instinctive. They are actually part of the temperament: what nature gives us. However, if the dog's temperament is poor through hereditary, there is only so much behavior modification can do. It takes a long time to determine a dog's temperament. When working in a private home, it may take several sessions of behavioral modification before I get a solid "feel" for the dog. I rely a lot on interviewing owners and observation. Is one shot in a rescue situation enough time to say I have evaluated the dog's temperament? No. I can get an idea only of the behavior at that point in time when I evaluate a dog. Even after hours with a dog, there may be aspects of the dog I am not witnessing. I still can only evaluate the behaviors I witness when with the dog. Therefore, temperament tests are not really testing temperament; they evaluate the behavior of the dog at that point in time.

When asked to test a dog, one of the first things I do is get a history on the dog and quietly observe him. I have someone else handle the dog as my behavior can influence the dog. I need as much controlled "real-world" as I can safely have. I want to see how the dog reacts to various elements of the location. I will begin to do subtle things (at first) around the dog to best as I can put him in real-world situations. I try never to push the dog to the point where he goes for me. I can get a decent idea of a dog's tolerance level without intentionally pushing him to the breaking point

When I evaluate a dog, I look for various things. What is the dog's behavior at that point? What does he do when I alter his environment? What potentials in the dog do I see? What is his body language telling me? Is he fast to back away or challenge? Does he show signs of recovery and curiosity after a startle? What is my overall impression of the dog, based on any known history and the evaluation? Does the dog show enough that I feel, with moderate work, he could be a good companion? If I do not see enough in the dog at that time, then I may have to suggest euthanasia.

When suggesting a rescue consider euthanasia, I have to set some criteria. Do I see enough in the dog that I feel the average foster home can work through with help in a reasonable amount of time? Based on my experience with the average home(s), is there

one I feel that would be able to continue the work or be suited for the dog. If I am on the fence, I will recommend working with the dog and then reevaluating. With some dogs, it just may be a case of needing different management and work. The dogs may be diamonds in the “ruff.” However, with some dogs, there is just a cold feeling I get in my gut. For these, I recommend the final sleep. Not all rescues will ever consider putting a dog down. Since many foster homes are average homes, I bear in mind that the dog may pose a risk in the foster home, even if never placed. Therefore, I go a step further.

When I explain why I am suggesting euthanasia to a rescue, I ask how many animals they would risk having to turn down to keep one highly questionable dog in foster. Is it reasonable to have to possibly turn down or wait list a dozen dogs that may be far closer to adoptability for one which I have seriously little hope. If the rescue is on the fence, I will offer to reevaluate the dog on another day. Many things can affect a dog’s behavior on any given day. A dog having an off day will not evaluate as well. A couple evaluations of a dog (depending on the concern) are not a bad idea if the rescue can do it. However, a dog that is really “off” and showing a significant number of worrisome behaviors is another thing. The rescue must realize that when a dog’s life undergoes a change, regressions are common. What is the rescue willing to risk for a definitely questionable dog? What if we can modify behaviors and make the dog appear “adoptable?” Is the rescue willing to risk the dog regressing in the new home /foster home to a point worse than before?

Temperament testing, or more accurately behavioral evaluations, are far from an exact science. I have seen dogs labeled risky after being pushed to the bite. In reality, the dogs showed an exceptional amount of tolerance prior to reacting. How many dogs are called unsuitable based on overzealous evaluators? I am reluctant to use props to test a dog. How a dog reacts to prodding by a fake hand and a toddler-height doll only tests the dog’s reaction to a fake hand, a doll and the evaluator. A dog may react differently to the real thing or the reaction may be to the evaluator and the prop combined. However, do I want to put a child at risk to test a dog? Tests may need to be applied more than once to acknowledge that dogs’ behavior can vary day to day. Do evaluators consider breed traits when evaluating a dog? A breed developed to be wary of strangers will not evaluate the same as a dog bred to be outgoing and accepting of every one. A Neapolitan Mastiff will not test the same as a Labrador Retriever. A Shetland Sheepdog will not test the same as a Chihuahua.

Those of us who do evaluate dogs for rescues and even for dog owners/clients must be careful and honest. We must recognize that we are not determining the true temperament of the dog: just the behavior on that given day at that given time. Is it fully accurate? No. Will there ever be an accurate temperament test? No. We can only make guesses based on what we observe at that time, what we know of the dog and breed, and hope we are not condemning a potentially great dog to an early death.