



MEDIA RELEASE

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New study could help improve adoption outcomes for shelter dogs

When a dog is returned to a shelter following adoption, it is important to understand the factors associated with its return. Time in animal shelters can be stressful for dogs due to a number of reasons, from disruption of their usual routine and exposure to loud noises to an inability to display their normal behaviour and the loss of their owner.

Due to the high stress associated with entry into a shelter, avoiding multiple re-entries is important in maintaining the welfare of shelter dogs. In addition, the post-adoptive return of dogs to animal shelters can compromise their welfare, consume the shelter's resources, and impact on the perception of the shelter within the community.

So why do adoptions fail, resulting in the return of the dog? Returning an animal to a shelter is often difficult with many factors impacting the decision. Typically, behaviour has been cited by owners as a contributing factor, with behavioural traits also being associated with initial surrender, euthanasia, and increased time to adoption.

A new study by researchers at the University of Alberta, Canada may provide an answer. Their research, which has just been published in the journal *Animal Welfare*, identifies the behavioural and physical factors detected whilst in the shelter that differentiate between successfully adopted and returned dogs. The study drew upon in-shelter behaviour and 'normal' dog traits to reveal the factors that set successful adoptions apart from returns. In doing so it avoided the potential bias in information provided by the original owner.



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The study examined over 1,700 dog records from an open admission, no kill shelter in Alberta, Canada. The percentage of dogs returned to the shelter was 14%. The researchers looked at characteristics such as age, breed, weight and sex, and behaviour elements such as aggression (towards other dogs and humans), fearfulness, excitability and anxiety. They also looked at the length of stay of the dogs, any non-standard medical care and whether the dog had been found as a stray or was an owner surrender.

The results were illuminating. The researchers discovered that the main difference between successful and non-successful adoptions was aggression towards other dogs, particularly when the breed and size of dog was also a factor.

Co author of the study Dr Clover Bench, Associate Professor at the University of Alberta said: *“Temperament testing alone does not reliably detect dog-dog aggression since these behaviours may not be reliably demonstrated during test batteries in the shelter. Since information on dog-dog aggression is not provided by temperament testing, adopters may have unrealistic expectations regarding an adopted pet’s behaviour. Unrealistic expectations of potential post-adoptive behaviour increase post-adoptive return. Aggression in dogs is typically most severe when directed towards other dogs and the perceived increased risk for serious incidents in larger breeds could explain a lower adopter tolerance for risks associated with dog-dog aggression. In contrast, we did not find that fear aggression, owner-directed aggression, health concerns or separation anxiety-related behaviours were significantly higher in the returned group of dogs when compared with successfully adopted dogs. “*

Based on the outcome of previous studies, the findings indicate that temperament testing is adequate for minimising the return of dogs with aggression, fearfulness, and anxiety directed towards humans, but may not adequately screen dogs with aggression towards other dogs.



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The results of this study have the potential for higher welfare outcomes for shelter dogs. Dr Bench added: *“Shelters may use our findings to identify dogs at risk for return due to dog-directed aggression and to modify adoption policies regarding dog-aggressive dogs. Shelters can also improve adopter education regarding dog-dog directed aggression, thereby lowering shelter return rates. Lowering return rates would be in the best interest of shelter dogs by reducing the stress associated with post-adoptive return and reducing overall shelter time.”*

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Further information

You can learn more about this study [here](#): The study ***Evaluating factors influencing dog post-adoptive return in a Canadian animal shelter*** by J R Friend and C J Bench was published in the UFAW journal *Animal Welfare* (*Animal Welfare* 2020, 29: 399-410. doi: 10.7120/09627286.29.4.399)

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