

# Temperament Testing in the Age of No-Kill

By Nathan Winograd

Once a fringe movement dismissed by the status quo, the no-kill movement is now the only legitimate standard for animal sheltering. Most communities are not there yet, but today, cities, counties, and even entire states are putting plans in motion to end the killing of healthy and treatable pets. Unfortunately, some communities are choosing to adopt the language of no-kill, but not the programs to end the unnecessary killing of homeless animals. In other words, some agencies are co-opting the no-kill brand and using it to maintain the status quo. And they get away with it because they hide behind euphemisms.



cause of (highly treatable) illnesses like upper respiratory infection and kennel cough, or because there were too many black dogs in the shelter. Today's savvy shelter director would never be so blatant, so unapologetic for the slaughter. Don't be fooled: Shelters still kill at an alarming rate (4.4 million creatures last year), but many are now doing it with a difference. They are now doing so under the cloak of scientific legitimacy. "The dogs and cats," we are told, "are unadoptable."

What makes these animals "unadoptable?" "We have temperament tested them," they'll tell you, "and the animals have failed. Placing them, therefore, would be contrary to the public interest." In other words, our shelters have a moral duty to kill them. The notion should shock and offend the average pet lover.

## The Newest Euphemism

For well over a century, the killing of dogs and cats has been a central strategy of most private SPCAs, humane societies and animal control facilities who contract with cities and towns to run shelters for stray dogs and cats, and pets who are no longer loved or wanted. And for decades, they turned to sodium phenobarbital, a barbiturate that "painlessly" ended life, to manage their shelter populations under the theory that the best we could do for the bulk of these animals was to provide them with a humane death. They even created a euphemism – "putting them to sleep" – to make the task of killing easier.

And, in the end, that's exactly what we became: a movement of euphemisms. Our euphemisms even rival those of the Pentagon. To their "collateral damage" and "non-combatants," we have "putting them to sleep," "euthanasia," or "fractious cats." Like theirs, our euphemisms have been created to obscure the gravity of what we are doing. In the age of no-kill, add one more: "unadoptable."

In the past, shelter administrators openly killed for reasons like lack of space, antithesis to certain breeds, because the cats were feral, be-

## Limitations of Temperament Testing

So, what is a temperament test? Are temperament tests necessary? Do they have predictive value? Should we do them? And if an animal "fails," should that necessarily mean a death sentence? Let's look at each question in turn.

Temperament testing is a series of exercises designed to evaluate whether an animal is aggressive. Because dog behavior is highly specific to context, it is unfortunately not enough to say that a dog is friendly and of reasonably good temperament if she comes into a shelter with her tail wagging. The flip side is also true. Because the shelter is a highly stressful, unnatural, and frightening environment for a dog who has just been abandoned by a family, the fact that a dog is scared and growls at staff on intake is not enough to make a determination that the dog is unfriendly and vicious. So it is not only fair, but a good idea, for shelters to evaluate dogs to make sure they can safely be placed into loving new homes.

But temperament testing has many limitations. It requires skill and training; the results greatly depend on the environment in which the test is conducted; and, because its predictive validity has not been established by any stretch, it can – and often does – result in dogs being wrongly executed.

Despite an article in the September/October 2003 issue of *Animal Sheltering* magazine, the claims of predictive validity do not stand up to scrutiny. In other words, we can't say, with any sort of scientific rigor, that the result of a temperament test has a definite correlation to what a dog will do once he or she gets comfortable in a home. If a dog fails his temperament test because the doll that is supposed to resemble a child scares the knickers off of him, does that necessarily mean the dog will react like that with your kid? If a dog passes the test with flying colors, does that necessarily mean that he and the mailman are going to be great pals? We are not sure.

In fact, because of the training and ability of shelter personnel or, more accurately, the lack thereof, if you took two testers and had them test the same dog, you could easily get two different results. If you took the same tester and the same dog over different days, you still might get different results.

### Violation of the No-Kill Ideal

The article in question suggested that some shelters had good results with temperament testing because their return rate for adopted dogs had declined. Unfortunately, while this may mean fewer aggressive dogs are being adopted out, it does nothing to reduce the bigger concern that friendly dogs are being wrongly killed. In other words, it is not enough that “no dogs” or “fewer dogs” have been returned to a shelter that has implemented temperament testing because this does not address the important issue of whether the test overreaches and is killing too many dogs.

In fact, from a no-kill perspective, the issue has been turned on its head. If too many dogs are being wrongly executed because they are failing a temperament test that is unfair, the fact that dogs are not being returned for aggression is only half of the equation – because the test is also killing non-aggressive dogs.

In order to be fair, a temperament test must do two things: (1) screen out aggression and (2) ensure that friendly, scared, shy, sick, or injured dogs do not get wrongly executed. By focusing on the first prong, traditional shelters have ignored the second, a violation that goes to the core of the no-kill ideal: Animals are to be judged and treated as individuals.

### Facets of the Problem

Part of the problem stems from the fact that temperament testing is still in its infancy. Its development is in the gray area between laboratory analysis and clinical trials, and has a long, long way to go before it gains the stamp of scientific legitimacy. But there are other reasons that temperament testing is so problematic.

One reason is that dogs are highly contextual, and we can't recreate life experiences in all their complexity. We can put a doll in front of a dog, but not a cooing, arms outstretched, grinning from ear to ear, real little kid who wants to run up to the dog and throw his arms around the pooch. If a dog reacts badly when we attempt to look at his teeth, we can't always differentiate whether the dog is aggressive, or just in pain from lack of good dental care. Stray dogs or dogs seized from cruelty situations who are underweight and have not eaten steadily sometimes react badly when someone tries to take their food away (one of the tests to determine “food aggression”). Hunger is not aggression, but again, we can't always tell the difference.

Another part of the problem is the unnatural environment of the shelter from the dog's perspective. It would be difficult to design a more frustrating environment for a dog than a kennel. Most shelters are filled with strange smells, dogs are placed alone in a barren kennel, there are lots of strangers, and the dog's daily routine is completely changed. Since they can't talk and tell you, “Leave me alone, I am scared and don't understand what is happening to me,” they communicate in the only way that biology allows – by backing up, barking, growling, and when all else fails, snapping.

And finally, part of the problem is lack of motivation to save lives. Shelter workers commonly retort that they do not enjoy killing the animals. No one is claiming that they do. But it is clear

that many shelters are not doing enough to save lives. Merritt Clifton, editor of *Animal People*, put it best: “The bottom line is that too many animal control departments and humane societies have a vested interest in doing what they have always done. Going a different and more successful route would mean accepting some of the blame for causing barrels to fill, day after day, with furry bodies. Complain though many animal control and humane society people might about the stress of killing, they still find killing easier than doing what is necessary to stop it.”

Engrave that in stone. It is undeniable. In temperament testing, shelters have found an easy out to the alternative of implementing a rigorous adoption and public relations program.

### All About Accountability

Having said all that, let me engage in what appears to be a contradiction: We should still do temperament testing. But, I advocate the use of temperament testing with the caveat that we need to be cognizant of its limitations, thorough in our training of shelter staff, and comprehensive in terms of our rehabilitation efforts before we condemn a dog to death. What we need is accountability, the central tenet of the no-kill philosophy.

At the Tompkins County SPCA, a shelter with animal control contracts, we take in dogs of all breeds, ages and circumstances. We seize aggressive dogs under New York State dangerous dog laws; we take in all strays; we take in the dogs of people who no longer want them; we take in dogs that scratch or bite; we take in dogs of every conceivable history and temperament. Yet, in 2003, 92 percent of all the dogs we took in passed our temperament test. And only three dogs were returned to us for aggression. You can be fair, you can test, and you can protect public safety, all without killing too many dogs. It is all about accountability.

The decision to end an animal’s life is an extremely serious one, and should always be treated as such. No matter how many animals a shelter kills, each and every one is an individual and deserves individual consideration. A strict and fair policy helps ensure that each decision is reached correctly. A dog may appear aggressive, but in reality he may simply

be frightened by his new surroundings and by being away from the only family he has ever known. Being able to determine whether a dog is truly aggressive or merely frightened can mean the difference between life and death.

### Incorporating No-Kill Philosophy

But what happens if a shelter puts in place a protocol that is fair and rigorous, and the dog “fails”? Should that mean a death sentence? Not necessarily. Implicit within the no-kill philosophy is the understanding that some animals, such as those who are irremediably suffering or hopelessly ill, will be killed for reasons of mercy. Dogs who are vicious, with a poor prognosis, are also included in this category.

But, a sick, injured, or traumatized animal with a behavior problem such as aggression can have varying degrees of prognosis, one of the complexities a shelter should consider in determining a strategy for post-temperament testing. If the prognosis for rehabilitation is good, fair, or even guarded, a no-kill shelter is obligated to provide treatment. Conditions such as upper respiratory infections, broken bones, and, in the case of behavior, food-related aggression are usually treatable. In two years of using our current temperament testing protocol, we have never killed a dog for food aggression, because the prognosis for rehabilitation is almost always better than guarded.

In the no-kill paradigm, the only animals who are killed are those with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation. A poor prognosis, though, doesn’t mean you have to kill them – there may be alternative forms of placement or even adoption. For example, a no-kill shelter could justify euthanizing a cat with renal disease who is on the decline and has a poor prognosis for recovery. But the shelter could also find the cat a loving home that will care for the cat for the remainder of the cat’s life, however short, and expect the new pet owner to properly euthanize the cat when she begins to suffer.

### Preserving Life at Tompkins County SPCA

Three days after a dog arrives at the Tompkins County SPCA, the dog goes through an initial temperament test. (See the case study

on the next page.) If the dog shows signs of aggression, a veterinarian who specializes in behavior medicine is consulted on the case. This veterinarian comes to the shelter and re-evaluates the dog, rules out a medical origin for the behavior, and either passes the dog and recommends a course of rehabilitation, or recommends that the dog be killed. After the evaluation is received, the executive director, the dog trainer, relevant staff, and the veterinary behaviorist discuss the issue before a final recommendation and determination is presented to the director.

What we are looking for is not just aggression, but aggression where the prognosis for rehabilitation is poor. Otherwise, the dog is placed on a behavior modification regimen to rehabilitate the behavior. In the cases of dogs where the prognosis is not clear (and it often isn't), we place dogs in a skilled foster home to better assess "real world" responses to "real world" behavior. In the end, if the dog is vicious with a poor prognosis, the dog is put to death.

The no-kill philosophy's break from traditional methods of sheltering is underscored by fundamental fairness to the animals. This commitment to fairness is echoed in the mission statement of virtually every humane society and SPCA in the country, most of which claim to cherish animals, enforce their rights, and teach compassion. These lofty goals can only be achieved if we judge, treat, and devise a plan (whether redemption, adoption, or destruction) for shelter animals individually with all the resources we can muster.

In Tompkins County, having such a plan means that 8 percent of the dogs we took in last year were killed for aggression, while 92 percent went to new homes. To the extent that we are evaluating dogs for aggression, we can be fair to the dogs by implementing a process oriented toward preserving life, even while we act to protect public safety from the threat posed by a vicious dog.

### Temperament Testing on Cats

But what about cats? Trying to temperament test a cat is fraught with more problems than dogs. In most shelters, cats are relegated to tiny cages, which not only precludes species-typical behavior, but requires them to sleep, eat, and defecate in the same space, something so contrary to feline behavior that I believe it is difficult to accurately assess a cat in that environment. True feral cats aside, we have seen too many cats appear shy, fearful, and defensive ("aggressive" is almost never the proper term for a cat with behavior problems) in the shelter, and then blossom in a home after placement in foster care or after adoption.

At any rate, from our point of view, it doesn't matter. The Tompkins County SPCA does not kill cats for behavioral reasons. A cat with behavior issues does not pose the kind of threat to public safety that would preclude placement in either a home environment or an alternative placement like a barn or feral colony. In our shelter, the terms "fractious cat," "aggressive cat," or "feral cat" mean only that we will employ different strategies for placement or adoption – they are not a death sentence for any cat.

## Case Study: Evaluation and Placement of a Dog at the Tompkins County SPCA

Dog behavior runs the gamut from simple bad manners, such as jumping up on people, to global undersocialization. Some behaviors are easily remedied; others are beyond the ability of a shelter to rehabilitate. Certainly no shelter should kill a dog for bad manners, and a no-kill shelter is obligated to rehabilitate all treatable behaviors, even those like food aggression.

Of the 812 dogs who came through the Tompkins County SPCA in 2003, 66 were killed for aggression. Most of these cases were not controversial. As an animal control facility, we seize dangerous dogs and take in dogs of all temperaments. Some of the 66 were ordered destroyed by a court of law after mauling children. Others had aggression that was so extreme, staff could not even approach the dog. But some were difficult decisions, involving multiple tests, foster care, and often heart-wrenching consultation between staff and outside experts.

A look at Mindy's case demonstrates the process involved in making the decision to either place or kill a dog, based on aggression, in Tompkins County:

Mindy came to the shelter after spending all of her eight years of life on the end of a thick logging chain. When her owner tired of her, he brought her to the SPCA. Mindy was undersocialized.



Upon arrival at the SPCA, she was obviously frightened of the new surroundings. She was given three days to acclimate; she was taken out for short leash walks and treated kindly. On day four, a staff member, trained by the Department of Behavior Medicine at Cornell University, performed a temperament evaluation. Mindy performed surprisingly well, given her history, but she did have a tendency to snap if anyone tried to take food, treats or toys away from her. The snap was immediate and severe.

Following the initial testing, a veterinarian board-certified in behavior medicine was

brought in to consult on the case. This veterinarian did another evaluation and confirmed the SPCA's findings. The SPCA dog trainer, the veterinary behaviorist, and I discussed the case. Given her eight years, the behaviorist felt that Mindy might not completely rehabilitate, and even if we did achieve some success, her new home would have to monitor and continue the process for the remainder of Mindy's life.

Our dog trainer asked for two weeks to work with Mindy and see if significant progress could be made. Despite the initial recommendation that placement was not possible, our history with treating food and object resource guarding showed that, as a general rule, the behavior had a fair prognosis for rehabilitation. I agreed to the extension.

After two weeks, the veterinary behaviorist again tested Mindy, and while some improvement was observed, Mindy still snapped when highly regarded objects – such as cat food and rawhide chews – were removed. Once again, the behaviorist recommended against placing Mindy. Once again, our dog trainer requested further behavior modification, this time in a foster home situation, which would not tie up kennel resources.

The behaviorist did note Mindy's significant progress. First, she had no other triggers for aggression. Second, except for the resource guarding, she had an extremely soft mouth. In other words, you could hand-feed her small pieces of highly regarded treats, such as cat food or hot dogs, and she would take them out of your hands carefully, so as not to bite your fingers. I agreed to treatment in foster care.

Mindy was sent into foster care with a skilled and SPCA-trained volunteer. The foster parent's goal was to work on desensitizing Mindy to the resource guarding. No time limit was set. During the next month, Mindy remained in foster care working on her aggression issues. The plan was two-fold: First, the foster parent was to teach Mindy that highly regarded objects were not scarce. She was given rawhides, treats, and toys in abundance. Second, the foster parent was to teach Mindy that removal of these

treats was not to be responded to negatively. She was subjected to removal of these objects on a daily and recurring basis. Each time she reacted negatively, she was admonished. Each time she reacted by sitting at attention, she was praised.

A benefit of the time spent in foster care included teaching Mindy how to live like a family dog. She became house-trained. She learned limits (no jumping up on people, no jumping on furniture, no chewing on personal items). She learned basic commands (sit, stay, come). But most of all, she learned that it was safe to share.

When the foster parent reported that Mindy no longer reacted negatively to removal of favored items, it was time for the big test. Mindy came back to the SPCA and the behaviorist and a couple of behavior residents tested her. They gave her a rawhide and removed it. They gave her toys and removed them. They gave her cat food and other treats and removed them. Each time, Mindy sat when the object was removed.

I was asked to come into the room. The same process was repeated. Each time, Mindy sat when the object was removed. Within a week of her retesting, Mindy was placed with a loving family. A recheck at two weeks showed that Mindy was doing well – no aggression was evident. The family was told to continue the process and to consult the SPCA should any relapse occur. None has been reported.

Mindy's temperament evaluation took over a month to resolve. But this case demonstrates a shelter's ability to be fair to dogs, while acting to protect public safety. To have condemned Mindy without consulting a behaviorist, trying desensitization in the shelter, working with a foster family, exposing the dog to real world circumstances, re-evaluating her, and following up with the adopter not only violates the no-kill ideal, but we believe it would have been patently unfair to the dog.

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