

A Dirty Little Secret

Temperament testing. It sounds harmless enough, but it's a method that's being used to sanitize the troubling business of deciding who's "adoptable" and who isn't.

► **By Francis Battista**

It's the latest big controversy at shelters and humane societies. The issue: which dogs and cats get to be labeled adoptable, and will therefore get saved, and which will be deemed unadoptable.

At the heart of the issue is the practice known as temperament testing.

Applied primarily to dogs, temperament testing purports to separate the doggie wheat from the doggie chaff, recommending the former to the eternal bliss (relatively speaking) of a new adoptive home, and the latter to a rapid demise.

Before getting into the details, a little perspective.

If I had been temperament tested as a child, I would have been declared an unadoptable boy. The same with most of my friends.

We were just your average kids growing up in the 50s with more energy than sense. We loved sports, chafed at education, and took

pride in driving our teachers to distraction. Today we would be dosed with Ritalin, but in an era that extolled the value of a good smack, we received liberal doses of corporal punishment. Like the poor kid we coaxed into belching his way through the alphabet one too many times for our second-grade teacher's liking. She grabbed him by the collar and the seat of his pants, dragged him over his desk, hurled him into the blackboard, and sent him to the principal's office ... again. This was great entertainment for the rest of us, but it did nothing to help that poor kid who, in hindsight, probably did need medication.

Today, we're all a bit more enlightened in relation to our kids. Why, then, the rush to judgment on our best friends?

The logic goes like this: There are too many dogs in shelters for the number of people wanting to adopt them, so it's better to concentrate on the ones who are well behaved out of the box, since these will be least likely to cause problems in their new homes and the most likely to stay adopted rather than be returned.

This can be translated more bluntly thus: Identify and kill the potential troublemakers right away, and bring the numbers of dogs available for adoption more in line with the number of people looking to adopt.

And the method that has been devised for sanitizing this troubling business is the temperament test.

Now, let's be clear. Behavioral evaluation goes on all the time, and we use our own version of testing here at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary – not as a life/death, pass/fail regime, but as a way of

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learning what areas of behavior need attention or what kind of home would be best for a dog.

However, temperament testing is hardly a science and, as used and abused in most municipal shelters, it has become a license to kill.

Paradoxically, all of this is being driven by the public demand for humane societies and city shelters to move to low-kill or no-kill protocols. The temperament test simply enables the shelter to tell the public that fewer and fewer adoptable animals are being killed. In fact, by this logic, a shelter can actually kill more animals and still declare itself a low- or no-kill organization. After all, the only dogs being killed now are the ones that failed the temperament test and are, therefore, officially unadoptable. By counting only the so-called adoptable animals in the no-kill equation, such organizations

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are attempting to pull the wool over the eyes of their membership or citizenry.

Don't be fooled by the air of clinical authority that is invoked by the term "temperament testing," especially as practiced in many municipal shelters where dogs are frightened, confused, and possibly injured or under attack by cage mates, and the smell of death is in the air. How in the world is anyone supposed to get an accurate reading on a dog's real nature in such threatening and unnatural surroundings? Dogs are brought into a testing area that is often stained with urine and feces from the other terrified dogs that preceded them.

Their ears are pulled and their toes are pinched. And if they have an inappropriate response, they fail.

If they are not attentive to the tester, they fail.

If they don't let the tester roll them on their back, they fail.

In short, if they behave like anything other than a laboratory beagle, they can fail.

One of the leading proponents of temperament testing is on record as stating that something like 70 percent of shelter dogs in



the Northeast are unadoptable and should be killed.

The point of a test given from this mindset is to find reasons to fail rather than to pass a dog.

Adoptable and unadoptable are very relative, woolly, and ultimately meaningless terms.

Some dogs are clearly unadoptable. Responsible no-kill organizations will agree that a dangerously vicious dog or one that has zero quality of life due to illness or age should not be offered for adoption and should probably be euthanized. It doesn't take a temperament test to figure that out.

On the other hand, Best Friends and other rescue organizations routinely find good homes for dogs that have one or more fatal flaws according to the temperament tests. We don't label them "unadoptable." We call them "special needs." And just as a dog with diabetes needs the right kind of home, so does a dog who, because of some earlier trauma, tends to snap at men who wear hats.

Communities and organizations that are truly committed to saving lives are moving away from the whole notion of rating their success on percentage of adoptable animals placed. Instead, we focus on the "live release rate," a calculation that includes all the animals that come into our care.

The no-kill movement is not a numbers game or an accounting scam that shifts column headings on the numbers of animals killed to alter the balance sheet. It is a repudiation of the whole idea of using mass killing as a means of pet population control. Instead, it calls for a commitment to the lives of those animals already born, a reduction in the pet birth rate through spay/neuter, and a dramatic change in the way we, as a nation of self-described animal lovers, regard our pets.

There is, after all, more than one way to recite the alphabet. 🐾