HOW TO HELP A SHELTER DOG TO ADAPT TO A NEW HOME

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INTRODUCTION
Correct matching and guiding a shelter dog through the adaptation period when moving to a new home is essential for this transition process to progress as smooth as possible, for both the dog and the owners, and is crucial to prevent the development of behaviour problems resulting in the dog being at risk to be returned to the shelter. Important factors influencing the capability of a shelter dog to adapt and function well in its new home are the characteristics of the dog, the social and environmental characteristics of the new living environment and the quality and quantity of information provided by the shelter to assist the owners in making the adoption process successful.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOG
The behavioural profile of dogs that are available for adoption through shelters varies substantially between individuals because the reason for relinquishment varies between dogs. Some dogs are relinquished due to factors associated with circumstances of the owners only, such as accommodation issues or owner related health reasons. It might be assumed that these dogs normally are relatively easy to rehome successfully, as it might be expected that they will again succeed in fulfilling the necessities to become a rewarding companion animal.

Other animals are relinquished because of factors related to the animal itself causing a problem in their previous living environment, such as the genetic predisposition of the animal (e.g. activity level) or minor behavioural issues that are part of the natural behavioural repertoire (e.g. barking). The owners might not have been able to meet the needs of their dogs or were intolerant of the behaviour or were lacking the commitment or knowledge to solve the difficulties or experienced problems controlling or training the dog. Placing these animals in a suitable environment in which the undesirable behaviour can be prevented or managed and with a family that is more tolerant, knowledgeable or committed can be more challenging, but the behavioural issues might be resolved relatively easily.

A proportion of dogs are relinquished because of the display of true behaviour problems. It can be anticipated that these problems will persist after adoption. Successfully rehoming a dog that displays more or less severe behaviour problems, can be challenging or impossible in some cases.

CHARACTERISTIC OF ADOPTERS
It is of crucial importance for companion animals to meet their adopters’ expectations and function well in their environment, as this will influence the quality of the relationship of the owners with the dog. To gain insight into the quality of the relationship between dogs and their owners Patjo et al. using the Monash Dog Owner Relationship Scale (MDORS) showed that the owner’s attitude towards their family dog, based on the amount of interaction and emotional closeness and the perceived costs of owning a dog, to be factors that can influence the risk of being relinquished. Other studies have shown that owners who experienced the amount of work and effort to take care of their pet to exceed their expectations are more likely to be returned to the shelter after adoption. This illustrates that the expectations owners have are not always realistic for example due to a lack of experience and knowledge of the ethological needs and behaviour of the species in general or unrealistic or insufficient information provided prior to obtaining a specific pet. Aspects as age of the adopters, gender and family composition can be a factor in expectations, tolerance level, time and effort to be willing to invest in the pet and the negative impact possible behaviour problems may have on the adopter’s life.

INDIVIDUALLY TAILORED COACHING, TRAINING AND COUNSELLING
The shelter staff should, based on the outcomes of validated assessment tools, classify dogs into categories based on the type and amount of coaching, training or counselling needed for the dog during the adoption appointment and throughout the follow up period after homing. Examples of possible categories are easy, average and difficult to home or adopt dogs.

Coaching program for easy to adopt dogs
The category of easy to adopt dogs includes dogs that are in good physical and behavioural health. The history of the dog and its behavioural profile did not reveal behavioural issues. When the dog is homed in an environment that is compatible with its physical, behavioural and emotional needs, it is expected that he can adapt easily, function well and have a good quality of life.

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The basic coaching program for easy to adopt dogs should consist of the shelter staff being in the role of an educator and facilitator. During the adoption appointment they:

- Educate the adopters about responsible pet ownership. Based on the scientific literature of the ethology of dogs the owner is informed about the normal behaviour of the species and their physical and behavioural needs. Next, the topics discussed in detail should be tailored to the specific requirements of the dog they adopt, the identified level of knowledge and experience of the adopters and the identified misinterpretations or misconceptions the adopters might have. This should include recognizing the emotional state of the animal and understanding how animals learn and communicate. How to communicate with the dog and influence its behaviour in an appropriate way and how to develop a good bond with the dog.

- Help owners to set realistic expectations of the adaptation process. Each shelter dog entering a new home goes through a process of adaptation which goes hand in hand with changes in behaviour. Dogs will start to relax in their new home between two to four weeks after adoption. For some animals it can take up to six months before they are totally settled and show their true personality. Some pets might be impressed and inhibited in their behaviour in first instance, withdraw or react more fearful than they would normally. Others show the opposite reaction and are overexcited by all new impressions and will gradually behave in a more calm and controllable manner. Whatever the direction and intensity of behavioural fluctuations the dog might show, it is important for adopters to be aware of this to prevent that they become disappointed but also to assure that they react in an appropriate way. Setting consistent house rules and creating routines will help in creating a predictable and controllable environment in which the animal will feel safe and relax is essential. For some individuals at some points in time giving space and freedom to explore and interact to increase confidence might be necessary whereas at other times controlling initiatives or enthusiasm might be required.

- Set the adoption up for success. The basic process of coaching needed for each dog adopted into a new household should be seen as comparable to the guidelines given to introduce a puppy to his new family. A well thought through plan should be laid out on how to set the transfer from the shelter and introduction to the new home and family up for success. Which topics and the detail into which they have to be discussed vary between dogs and adopters and are determined by the characteristics of the individual pet, its adopters and their living environment. Topics that should minimally be explored are how to transport the dog, how to introduce it to the new home and social environment, house training, learning to stay alone, teaching life skills and training the dog using reward based methods.

Instruction programs for average to adopt dogs
For the category average adoptable dogs a rehoming and adoption instruction program should be implemented. These animals have behavioural characteristics that might increase the chance of developing undesirable behaviour or behaviour problems which might prevent or decrease the quality of the human animal relationship. When applying a more extensive coaching program for the adopters and the pets during the adoption appointment and during the follow up period it should be possible to successfully rehome these pets, despite the fact that it can be predicted that the integration into the new household will be more challenging for both the pet and its adopters.

Next to the basic adoption coaching described for easy to adopt dogs extra investments should be done by the shelter staff and adopters to prevent behaviours to become a problem again. A higher level of expertise is required from the shelter staff. In collaboration with the adopters a feasible plan for managing behaviour and training their dog needs to be composed teaching the adopters how to recognize, elicit and reinforce desirable behaviours and how to avoid and extinguish problematic behaviour. For example for
an energetic and excitable dog management can be implemented through for example implementing a predictable schedule in which a variety of activities are provided and different types of enrichment can be implemented combined with predictable resting moments. Situations leading to overexcitement and uncontrollable behaviour should be avoided. Games or training exercises can be implemented to increase self-control and training devices such as non-pull harnesses can be applied to increase owner control over the dog. How to stop undesirable behaviour should be discussed.

Regarding the follow up, time needs to be scheduled for regular contact between the shelter staff and adopters to discuss the progress and identify possible difficulties to assure that the integration into the new home progresses at the desired pace and management and training goals are achieved.

Counselling difficult to adopt dogs
Difficult to adopt pets display true behaviour problems which will make the successful integration into the new home challenging. The type of behaviour problems displayed might vary in amount of behaviour problems, the severity of the problems and risk they possess. The adopters will need to invest a substantial amount of time and energy to make the integration into the family successful and living with the animal might result in a certain amount of impact on their life for the rest of the pet’s life.

To make the adoption successful the adoption appointment should have the format of a behaviour consultation preferably performed by shelter staff that has the expertise at the level of being an animal behaviourist or the shelter staff in cooperation with an external animal behaviourist. Based on scientific evidence and best practice a phased behaviour modification program has to be composed in cooperation with the adopters, and not dictated by the counsellor, to make the implementation of the behaviour modification program feasible and effective. For example an owner of a dog displaying aggression towards other dogs should during the consultation be trained to apply several simple techniques to make it possible to walk pass other dogs during regular walks and training devices to increase control should be applied. A thorough follow up procedure needs to be implemented probably including follow up consultations.

Follow up care after adoption
How exactly and the frequency at which the follow up is conducted, will be dependent on the categorisation of the pet, the specific problems identified and the resources available to the shelter (e.g. telephone follow up for the easy to adopt pets and follow up home visits for difficult to adopt dogs). Segurson 7 recommends that post adoption follow up is provided by phone at 3 days, 3 weeks, 3 months and 1 year after adoption. For pets with managed pre-existing problems a follow up by phone is recommended at day 1 and 3 and a follow up visit with a behaviour counsellor at 1 week, 1 month and 3 months or when it is needed. Although this can be seen a useful general framework, it will be beneficial to determine the frequency and format of follow up based on the individual cases.

REFERENCES