SHELTER DOGS AND THEIR ADOPTERS. HOW CAN YOU HELP THEM TO MAKE THE ADOPTION SUCCESSFUL?

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INTRODUCTION
The behaviour a shelter dog displays after adoption is influenced by many factors including its physical condition, its temperament and background, previous learning experiences and the characteristics of the new owners and living environment. Some dogs might have been relinquished because of factors not related to the dog such as the owner passing away or relationship changes. Other dogs might have been relinquished because of the display of behaviour problems, which they will continue to display after adoption if they are not treated. Others might start to display problem behaviour after adoption due to difficulties with adapting to the new environment.

Comparing the findings of studies identifying behaviour problems as a cause for relinquishment is complicated because behaviour problems are defined and categorized different between authors. For example, categorisations based on the symptoms (e.g. house soiling, barking, destructive behaviour, biting) the target of the behaviour (e.g. stranger directed aggression, dog-dog aggression) or the underlying emotional state of the animal (e.g. frustration, anxiety) can be found. In addition, the results of studies into the causes of pet relinquishment may vary substantially as the studies are influenced by factors such as differences in the methodological approach, the continent or country the studies are conducted, demographic characteristics of the areas where the shelters are located and variances in policies between shelters. This raises the question to what extent the findings of studies can be generalised.

AMOUNT OF DOGS DISPLAYING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS
The display of behaviour problems is an often mentioned cause for relinquishment of dogs to shelters. In one study conducted in the USA, it was reported that forty per cent of the dogs displayed one or more behaviour problems and behaviour problems being one of the most common reason for the relinquishment of dogs to shelters.

It is also possible that owners are faced with unexpected situations, for example the dog displays behaviours it did not show before that are experienced as undesirable or problematic (e.g. uncontrollable behaviour, destructive behaviour, aggression) by the new owners which might decrease the chance of a lifelong successful adoption of the dog.

Reported percentages of unsuccessful adoptions vary between continents and countries. Marston et al. reported in Australia 7.2% of the adoptions to be unsuccessful compared to 18% reported by Patronek et al. in the USA. Behaviour problems are given as a main reason for returning the dog to the shelter. A study conducted in the UK by Diesel et al. reported that 14% of the adoptions to be unsuccessful and behaviour problems being the main cause for the return of the dogs in 58.6% of the cases and the dog needing more attention in 15.5% of the cases. In an Italian study it was shown that more than half of all adopted dogs were returned due to undesirable behaviour or behaviour problems such as hyperactivity, excessive barking, inappropriate elimination, destructions to the house, disobedience and intolerance of other pets in the house. Dogs that displayed aggression represented 15% of this group.

Wells and Hepper found that 68% of the owners experienced behaviour problems with their dogs during the first month after adoption. Fearfulness (53,4%), excessive activity (37,4%), destructiveness (24,5%) and inappropriate elimination (21,3%) being the most frequent reported problems. A large percentage of dogs returned to the shelter because of behavioural problems are returned during the first week (40%) or two months (10%) after adoption.

A GENERAL FRAMEWORK TO HELP ADOPTERS TO MAKE THE ADOPTION SUCCESSFUL
BASIC ADVICE APPLICABLE TO ALL DOGS
As the personality of dogs adopted from a shelter varies a lot as do the characteristics of the new owners and their living environment the type and amount of coaching that is needed varies and should be tailored to the individual situation. In general you should consider the basic approach for advice given to adopters of shelter dogs to be comparable to the advices you would give to owners adopting a puppy. During an adoption consultation for adopters of shelter dogs you should minimally include topics of basic ethology and training such as:
- How to interpret the emotional state and behaviour of the dog and how to communicate with the dog
- Guidelines on the needs of the dog and how to provide these.
- How to create a good bond with the dog.
- How to gradually introduce the dog to its new environment including introduction to other pets.
- Information on how dogs learn and the correct use of training techniques to develop desirable behaviour and stop undesirable behaviours.
- Advices on house training.
- How to teach the dog to get used to staying at home alone in a relaxed way.

ADVICES APPLICABLE TO DOGS DISPLAYING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS
MANAGEMENT
As the first weeks after adoption are crucial, in addition to the basic advices that are applicable to all dogs, emphasis should be placed on the direct management of the problem behaviour. This should be done through implementing short-term management to (1) guarantee safety and welfare. (2) To prevent the display of the problem behaviour and subsequent set backs into old behaviour. (3) To increase coping and settling into the new environment and (4) to prevent a negative effect on the dog-owner relationship. Management can be implemented through:
- Controlling the environment: For example through removing the eliciting stimulus, avoiding the stimulus or decreasing the intensity of the stimulus or through specific training exercises or training aids to increase the possibility of the owner to control the dog or to increase self-control of the dog in problem situations.
- Increasing coping: For example through giving access to locations, stimuli, interactions associated most with positive emotions and least with negative emotions. Through informing and/or adjusting the owner’s perception of the behaviour. Through installing predictable and controllable house rules and routines and the use of for example pheromone product or nutraceuticals to increase coping.
Some practical examples of management measures for fearful dogs are provided in table 1 and 2.

Table 1 and 2: Practical examples of management measures of fearful dogs to increase the chance of a lifelong successful adoption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MANAGEMENT: CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>Social stimuli</th>
<th>Non social stimuli</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remove the stimulus</td>
<td>E.g. other dogs, unfamiliar people</td>
<td>E.g. sounds, traffic</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Lock doors</td>
<td>- Avoid the stimulus e.g. walk in a quiet area with no or a low frequency of traffic</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Walk in a area where exposure to the stimulus is unlikely</td>
<td>- Switch sounds of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decrease the intensity of the stimulus</td>
<td>- Block view</td>
<td>- Stay at a sufficient distance</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Provide a hiding place</td>
<td>- Play music to camouflage external sounds</td>
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<td>- Install a baby gate or crate</td>
<td>- Training: recall, sit, auto check in with owner, distracting games</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training and training aids to increase control and avoid exposure</td>
<td>- Training aids: walk on long line, head halter, muzzle, toys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Training: recall, go to crate, auto check in with owner, distracting games/toys</td>
<td>- Training aids: walk on long line, head halter, toys</td>
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MANAGEMENT: INCREASE COPING

| Give access to locations, stimuli and interactions associated most with positive emotions and least with negative emotions | - Provide access to a location with less sound intensity e.g. sound isolated safe haven or other room  
- Provide access to locations associated with comfort stimuli e.g. owner's bedroom, safe haven  
- Owner supporting the dog when the dog is anxious or fearful  
- Install predictable house rules and predictable and controllable routines  
- Schedule daily relaxing and enjoyable activities for the dog e.g. playing games with the owner, play session with another social dog if appropriate  
- Provide toys to distract the dog |

| Inform and/or adjust owner’s perception | - No forced exposure  
- No punishment  
- Correct supporting the dog  
- Dog will not grow out of the problem spontaneously |

BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION PROGRAMS (BMP)
The actual behaviour of the dog in its new home can differ substantially from the behaviour displayed at the shelter. Cooperation with or referral to a qualified behaviour counsellor might be necessary to develop a feasible and effective BMP to be implemented immediately after homing for dogs knowing to display behaviour problems and for dog developing unforeseen problem behaviours for example due to difficulties with adapting to the new environment. For the application of a treatment program to be successful this should be tailored in detail to the individual needs and capabilities of the dog and its owners in the new environment and often be phased to make the application feasible starting with addressing the problem(s) having the highest priority first. This requires a detailed diagnosis which minimally includes a detailed description of the stimuli and context causing the problem behaviour. An evaluation of the predisposing, initiating and maintaining factors of the behaviour and identification of the coping strategies used and how they may be changed or improved.

After an accurate diagnosis is obtained foundation training exercises can be trained in preparation of applying techniques such as systematic desensitization, counterconditioning or response substitution to change the underlying negative emotion of the problem into a positive emotion and decisions can be made on the use of drugs or other products to support the behaviour modification program.

REFERENCES