Training shelter dogs to be quiet

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This paper will describe how one shelter has 'quietened' their adoption kennels.

Over-arousal is, quite literally, a killer for shelter dogs. Shelters are inherently highly stimulating environments due to their spatial restrictions requiring dogs to live in close proximity with other dogs, ambient noise levels and odour The dogs may also have lost their human attachment object and be estranged from the routines of their previous lives. Many may have come to the shelter after traumatic or distressing events. All of these circumstances result in an increase in the dog's level of arousal. The presence of strangers, such as members of the public, can cause the dogs to become even more highly aroused, resulting in greater barking and physical activity. A dog's behaviour directly affects how adoptable the public views him or her to be. The dogs that bark, jump at the gates or bounce off the walls of their runs do not attract adopters (Marston, Bennett, & Coleman 2005).On the contrary, they actually repulse them, with adopters moving rapidly past the hyperactive and noisy animals. Dogs displaying such behaviour stay in shelters for longer, have an increased risk of behavioural deterioration and subsequent euthanasia. However, shelters can present both themselves and the dogs better even with relatively limited resources.

As identified in the preceding papers in this series, the key to reducing barking is to keep arousal levels low and reward quiet behaviour. In the shelter, this is especially challenging but can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, if during the course of their day-to-day activities, staff simply reward quiet dogs with a treat when passing the runs, this will cause a decrease in barking - at least when staff are present. However, to generalise the behaviour to the presence of non-staff individuals, small containers attached high on the front of each run are filled with treats. Signs on the containers encourage the public to give the dog a treat but **only** if it is sitting quietly in the run. Please note that due to the risk of cross-infection by members of the public, these food bowls can only be filled if there are no infectious conditions, such as canine cough, in the adoption kennels. Simply increasing the time that a member of the public interacts with an individual dog, increases the probability of that dog being adopted. However, even if this happy outcome does not eventuate, the dogs obtain 'free' environmental enrichment from the interaction.

Some dogs become territorial about their run and bark or display aggressive behaviour when an 'intruder' approaches. If the 'intruder' is a prospective adopter, then it is likely that they will move on and look at another dog. When people move away in response to such barking, they inadvertently reward the dog and increase the probability that the dog will continue to bark in this situation. Staff and volunteers should simply stand still while the dog is barking, using appropriate non-threatening body language such as averted eyes and a non-frontal body position, and only move away when the dog stops barking. Initially there may only be a short period of quiet and the person may only take one step away before waiting for the next pause in barking to take another. However, with patience the dog learns that people only leave when it is quiet, therefore there is little point in barking.

Barrier aggression to other dogs moving past the run not only heightens the arousal level of the dogs involved, which increases the risk of injury to staff and volunteers moving the dogs around, but can also sensitise dogs to all future encounters with others of their kind. This can be a real problem for future owners and increases the risk of a dog being returned post-adoption. Desensitisation and counter-conditioning can reduce, or eliminate, much of this behaviour.

Environmental enrichment

The use of food puzzles, such as Kongs, forces dogs to consume food far more slowly than if the food were presented in a bowl and approximates the behaviour of a dog scavenging for food in the wild. Whilst eating, the dog cannot bark. The repetitive licking, required to extract the food from the toy, lowers stress levels enabling the dog to cope better with a shelter stay and reducing the likelihood of behavioural deterioration and hyper-arousal occurring. Ideally, all food should be presented in this way but, acquiring enough sturdy toys that can be easily disinfected is relatively expensive and the manpower required to clean and disinfect these items repeatedly through the day is unavailable. For most shelters, it is not possible to implement this strategy on a large scale but by targeting the most aroused or 'at-risk' animals, significant effects can be achieved. A more accessible version of such food toys are 'doggy icy poles'. These are frozen blocks of meat or stock juices with a few bits of meat or kibble incorporated into them. These icy-poles also help keep shelter dogs cool in summer.

'Time-out' away from the kennels also helps lower arousal levels by allowing the dogs to have some time in a quieter place with volunteers and staff who engage them in training or massage. The rationale is that calmer dogs are less likely to bark when returned to their run. Massage lowers the dog's heart rate and blood pressure, key indicators of stress and, if performed appropriately, massage stimulates the release of oxytocin and endorphins which are associated with a positive emotional state. Pairing this positive emotional state with people is an important part of their rehabilitation process for many shelter dogs. Short periods of massage can produce long-term effects. In rodents, heart rate reductions can be observed for three to four hours after a short massage session has taken place.

Physical Environmental changes

Sometimes physical environmental factors can be manipulated to reduce the arousing nature of the environment.

Many facilities are designed so that a dog must be walked past many other runs to exit the kennels, for a walk or to meet prospective adopters. For example, Animal Aid has a noise wall around the kennels. There used to be only three gateways through this wall, one at each end and a central one, This meant that any dog exiting the kennels, had to run a 'gauntlet' of up to 15 dogs. As the dog passed each run, the level of arousal increased and both the kennelled dogs and the dog being moved would become increasingly noisier and physically active. This made the dogs being moved more difficult to handle, putting staff and volunteers at risk of injury but also meant that the highly aroused dog would not present itself to potential adopters optimally, having become highly aroused by its journey. By putting more gates in the noise wall, dogs were required to pass far fewer kennels and arousal levels and barking were greatly reduced.

Dog kennels, with their need to be easily disinfected, are an acoustically harsh environment. The ambient noise is comprised not only of sound that travels directly from the source to the ear but also that reflected from the structure, particularly roof. The use of acoustic panels, which prevent sound reflection from the roof, could result in a significant reduction in sound levels (at one site this has been calculated in the region of a 30-40% reduction). The use of such materials should be considered when shelters are undergoing refurbishment.

Other elements besides barking contribute to a noisy shelter environment. Staff shouting at each other or noisy public announcement system can contribute significantly to environmental stress not only for the dogs, but also for any humans in the area. The use of personal radios for the staff significantly reduces ambient noise levels. Research has identified that certain types of acoustic stimulation such as rock-music increase barking levels, whereas classical music reduces it (Wells, Graham, & Hepper 2002). Therefore, if staff like to have a radio on, it should be tuned to a classical station to keep barking minimal.

In summary, quieter shelters are pleasanter places for staff to work in and the public to visit as well as providing better welfare for the animals housed there. The adopting public will spend more time in a quiet facility than a noisy one and will preferentially interact with calm, quiet dogs.

Reference List

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