

# Putting Assessment to the Test

*With concerns over the reliability and validity of the behavior evaluations used in shelters across the country, the Center for Shelter Dogs in Boston sets out to scientifically develop one of its own.*

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## In the so-called “real-life room” at the Animal Rescue League of Boston,

a woman disguised in an overcoat and a big hat opens the door and approaches a young pit bull terrier named Penny. Penny rears back, then barks and growls as the woman tries to solicit affection. Her reaction to the strange woman is consistent with how Penny reacts when the same woman, now undisguised, attempts to play with her and later when a man walks into the room and approaches her. Closely observing and taking notes on Penny’s tail position, ear position and other physical responses to these staged scenarios is Dr. Amy Marder, director of the Center for Shelter Dogs (CSD) at the Animal Rescue League of Boston and one of the most renowned applied animal behaviorists in the country.

All of these scenarios and many others presented to Penny are subtests that compose a personality assessment test called MATCH-UP (Marder ARL Test for Canine Homing using Understanding and Predictability), designed by Marder from research she conducted in her previous position as vice-president of behavioral medicine at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Marder and her staff at CSD are now, with the help of a \$3 million grant the center received in 2008, putting that test to its own test by subjecting it to scientific validation. Though dozens of such assessments exist and are being used at shelters across the country to determine a dog’s temperament,

CSD’s study would, as the center claims, mark the first time that any shelter-dog assessment test has ever been “fully” validated scientifically.

CSD will publish its research in a peer-review journal sometime later this year and will then begin disseminating the refined and validated version of the test (called MATCH-UP II) to shelters across the country. CSD hopes to eventually establish the test, which takes about 15 minutes to conduct, as a nationwide, standardized assessment that most average-size shelters can use to elicit the personality traits of the dogs it admits and help predict how those dogs will behave after adoption and once settled in a home environment. With this test,

CSD believes that it will have developed a tool that shelters can use to enhance their understanding of the dogs they serve and better meet the dogs' individual needs. In theory, the test could help boost adoption rates at shelters and lower return rates.

As Marder sees it, the need that shelters have for such a tool is immense. "We have to do better than what we're doing now with testing dogs in shelters," Marder says. "Few of the tests have been tested for validity and reliability. These are requirements you need to have for any test of measurement, like IQ and personality tests on people, before you can trust it."

No doubt, assessments trigger consternation. Many have garnered a bad reputation among those in the animal welfare community for being inaccurate, invalid and simply unfair to the dogs. Marder and her staff have had to take all of that into account while researching, developing and validating their own assessment. It's a formidable task.

### ***Repurposing the assessment***

For several decades, shelters across the country have been using one behavior assessment or another to ask one very loaded question: Which dogs can you adopt out and which can you not? Of course, at many shel-

ters, dogs assessed as "unadoptable" are often the ones euthanized. "And that's the problem," says Dr. Frank McMillan, director of well-being studies at Best Friends. "These assessments are not always representative of the animal's true nature. Animals often respond in shelters very differently than they do in safe and loving homes."

In developing a test they can claim as valid, Marder and her staff at CSD have had to wrestle with the representational problem McMillan cites — that when applied in a shelter environment, an assessment can generate skewed information about a dog, since the stress that many dogs experience in a shelter can cause them to perform on tests in ways they wouldn't behave in a home environment.

Another factor that has tarnished the credibility of assessment tests, a factor that has proven to be one of the biggest challenges in developing MATCH-UP II, is that dogs change over time in the shelter and after



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they've been adopted, rendering the results of certain tests suspect, if not erroneous.

CSD says, however, that its research has shown that dogs do carry certain underlying personality traits that are consistent over time, from when a dog is in a shelter to several months after he's been adopted, traits such as friendliness, fearfulness and aggressiveness. CSD is currently verifying to what extent those traits can be measured in a shelter using MATCH-UP I. That's where CSD's validity study comes in, to gauge whether or not its test is actually capturing an accurate measurement of personality traits that remain with dogs well after adoption.

To determine how accurately (or inaccurately) MATCH-UP I's subtests predict those traits, CSD interviewed 138 adopters of dogs who had been assessed with

MATCH-UP I and asked those adopters how their dogs have reacted to certain situations that mirror those that were presented to the dogs in their assessment. Once its research is completed, CSD will have data that show how often each of MATCH-UP I's 10 subtests (such as the stranger test described above) predicted a dog's behavior in the home. CSD will use this data to refine MATCH-UP I into MATCH-UP II, which CSD will then subject to additional validity and reliability testing.

Dr. Gary Patronek, vice-president of animal welfare and new programs and Marder's supervisor at the Animal Rescue League of Boston, stresses that MATCH-UP II is not intended as a tool to determine whether or not a dog is adoptable.

"[The test] is not about passing or failing," he says. "It's about learning about that dog and trying to figure out how to best match him [with an adopter]. If we're trying to steer people away from other sources of dogs, like puppy mills, and tell them to go to the shelter, the only way that shelters can optimally do that is by providing more and more service, so that when a person comes to the shelter to get a dog, they have a much better chance of walking out with a dog they're going to love and that will fit their lifestyle."

Many shelters, in addition to the Animal Rescue League of Boston, have already begun to use assessment tests to make the best match between dogs and people. Tanya Roberts, manager of the training and behavior department at Oregon Humane Society (OHS) in Portland, says the assessment OHS uses has tipped off her and her staff to certain behaviors in dogs that, had those behaviors gone unnoticed, might have been the undoing of their adoptions.

Roberts says, however, that OHS views the results of its behavior assessment as a "snapshot in time." When an assessment is conducted, "the dog might be in a

## Best Friends' behavior assessment

When dogs arrive at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, each one undergoes a behavior assessment conducted by our team of trainers. The purpose of the assessment is not to label dogs "adoptable" or "unadoptable," but to gather some potentially useful information that isn't always apparent by other means. Best Friends' animal behavior consultant Sherry Woodard, who designed the assessment, calls it a "tool of discovery."

Best Friends uses the assessment to gauge what kind of training a dog might need, where he might be best placed at the Sanctuary, what sort of care and living arrangement he might need, and whether it's appropriate yet to send him on a sleepover or an outing.

If a dog exhibits some problematic behaviors during the assessment, the trainers often reassess a dog after some time has passed to determine if the dog has progressed or regressed. Doing several assessments gives trainers ideas on how they might readjust the dog's care plan and his living arrangement and what kind of adopter he might be best suited for.

Woodard stresses, however, that results are "just a snapshot in time," and that the results generated with a particular dog one day could be different the next. She explains that any number of factors can influence how a dog performs on the assessment, such as how the dog happens

to be feeling that day, whether the person conducting the assessment is male or female, and so on.

In the assessment, dogs are presented with a series of situations, such as encountering a stranger who enters the room, having their paws and ears touched, and being hugged. The trainers observe and record the dog's reactions to each of the situations.

Best Friends trainer Pat Whitacre says the assessments can have surprising results. "We sometimes see behaviors we didn't expect," he says, "but that's the point of any assessment — to ask questions you don't know the answers to."

different state than he will be in a week's time," she says. Still, she doesn't discount the information the assessment generates. "The test can be helpful for putting in some management techniques and cautions around the dog, because we're all concerned about the dog going into the public and possibly hurting a kid or another animal."

### *A fairer shake*

Behind any assessment is the person conducting it, with his or her own subjective interpretations of dogs' behaviors, interpretations that CSD sees as often undermining the accuracy and reliability of existing assessments. CSD is therefore making a concerted effort to limit any allowance for subjectivity in MATCH-UP II — by spelling out how conductors of the test are to interpret the behaviors they observe.

"Any assessment tool needs to be reliable, which basically means it takes consistent measurements across time or through different people," says Seana Dowling, research director at CSD. "A valid instrument measures what it's supposed to be measuring, not something else. So if you think you're measuring fearfulness with that dog who's crouched in the back of the cage, it better be fearfulness and not fatigue."

Another problem that Marder sees in other tests, and has taken pains to neutralize in her own, is the loose, often negative language used to interpret certain behaviors, language she thinks can unfairly condemn dogs. To further eliminate subjectivity in her test, Marder has devised and incorporated into her test a scoring system — based on the test's stringent interpretations of behaviors — that rates dogs on friendliness, fearfulness and aggression. Marder hopes that shelters can employ the system to better communicate with each other about the dogs in their care, especially when transferring dogs from one shelter to another.

Only time and further study will tell, however, if MATCH-UP II becomes that standardized method for assessing dogs, a method as accurate and legitimate when used at a shelter in Boston as it is when used at a shelter anywhere else.

### *One tool among many*

Back in the real-life room, Marder is in the middle of testing Penny when she asks her assistant Laney MacDougall to bring in Virgil, another pit bull terrier MacDougall has been fostering with Penny in her office. It has become apparent that Penny perks up whenever she's around other dogs. With Virgil in the room, Penny becomes less fearful and a lot more playful — an essential piece of information that Marder includes in Penny's profile.

"She would have to be in a quiet home with an intelligent person who understands her ... and who has another dog," Marder says once the test is over.

CSD is working on the premise that no assessment, not even their own, can detect everything there is to know about a dog's personality, and that any assessment is simply one tool in a big box of many that shelters need to incorporate into understanding the dogs in their care. 🐾

