

The Basics of Shelter Dog Training

Developing a volunteer “head start” program

By Mychelle Blake, M.S.W., C.D.B.C.

Once I had a telling experience that revealed the importance of instilling knowledge of basic commands in shelter dogs. A volunteer was working in a shelter parking lot with a very large black dog who, while friendly and sweet, was continuously overlooked by adopters because of his size and color.

An older couple happened to pass by and see the volunteer ask the dog to sit and lie down. He happily complied. I will always remember the expression of shock and amazement on the pair’s faces. It was as if the dog had sat up and started to recite Shakespeare.

As a dog trainer, I would not have given the dog’s act of merely sitting and lying down a second thought unless I’d happened to see its effect on nearby humans. To many members of the public, a dog performing basic tricks seems an incredible feat—something only canine stars might do. I was delighted to find out that, based on what they saw in the parking lot, the amazed older couple decided to meet with the big, black dog, fell in love with him, and took him home.

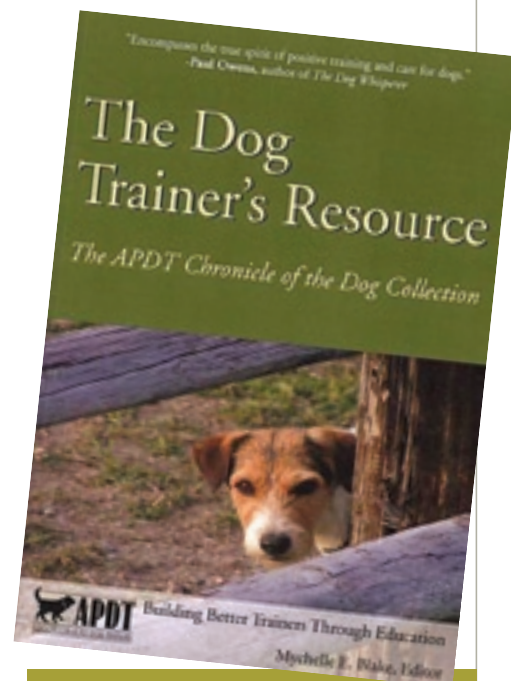
While enrichment at many shelters has improved over the years, dogs are often still overwhelmed by the constant noise and stimulation. Their anxiety and stress can lead to spinning, paw and tail chewing, licking granulomas, barrier frustration, and an increase in fearful or aggressive behavior. To help dogs thrive in both the shelter and their new homes, it is imperative to reduce their elevated stress levels.

In recent years, many shelters have developed “head start” programs designed to reduce stress and increase the adoptability of their canine residents, particularly the more active adolescent dogs and the less popular breeds who have a hard time attracting attention from visitors.

These programs can also increase dogs’ chances of staying in their new homes permanently. A 2000 study in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* found that owners’ most frequently listed reason for pet relinquishment was behavioral problems. The study (“Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters,” Vol. 3, No. 2) also found that, of the owners studied, 39 percent of those relinquishing their dogs to shelters for behavioral reasons reported getting the dog at a shelter in the first place.

If those study results are correct, dogs adopted from shelters appear to be at a high risk of ending up there again. As a shelter volunteer, worker, and trainer, I’ve seen this finding confirmed by the high percentage of adolescent dogs coming through shelter doors. They are often “wild” adult dogs who received no training as puppies and whose rambunctiousness overshadows their many positive qualities. It is easy to understand why adopters—who might be new to dog ownership, obedience training, or the stress-related behaviors that are typical in a shelter environment—would be hesitant to take a dog bouncing off the cage door into a meeting room. But if you work with the same dog, training her to sit as you pass her kennel, you’ve transformed her into an animal a prospective adopter would be more eager to meet.

Giving a stressed dog something to do can alleviate his anxiety in much the same way that exercise and positive interaction can remedy depression and anxiety disorders in humans. Time and again, I have seen dogs go from spinning in their runs to calming down so much that they are more able to handle the shelter environment. Teaching a dog to “sit,” “stay,” or perform a trick provides mental and physical exercise as well as positive interaction with humans.



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A dog who knows basic commands can also make an easier transition into the home, and the training provides the owners with tools to teach their new companion. In-shelter training demonstrates that average pet owners can help modify a dog’s behavior, encouraging people to take their dogs to obedience classes that will increase the probability of dogs remaining part of the family.

Training the Trainer

A shelter dog training program can be as simple or as elaborate as your shelter’s resources dictate. Having a trained professional lead your program is optimal but may not be feasible. A wealth of excellent



strating that a dog can keep himself from snatching the big pile of hot dogs on the floor in front of him is extremely impressive to the average adopter, particularly ones who have never trained a dog.

The selection of dogs to participate in the program depends on each shelter's situation. My preference is to pick two types of dogs. The first group includes dogs who may have a hard time finding a home due to age, color, or breed; a head-start program may help keep their stress levels down during their longer stay in the shelter, and it may also make them more attractive to adopters. The second group includes adolescent active breeds and breed mixes: Labs, pit bulls, dalmatians, certain types of hounds, and shepherds. These are "bouncy" dogs—the ones who were adorable as puppies but whose adolescent energy levels have caused their owners to run in terror. Often these dogs just need some basic training and some proper outlets for their mental and physical needs. I have found that they enjoy the program more than any other dogs because it provides an outlet for their enthusiasm.

In choosing dogs for your program, you should also take into account the needs of your volunteers. Some of my volunteers have never owned a dog before and are volunteering primarily to get some "dog time" for themselves. Some may feel physically unable to handle a boisterous dog or intimidated by certain breeds. In these cases, I may start the first class with an "easier" dog who will not be overwhelming, slowly introducing my students over the next few classes to more likely head-start candidates. By accommodating the skill level of your volunteers and giving them the tools to work with your most challenging residents, you'll find that the benefits are twofold: their work can increase the potential for more lifetime adoptions, and as trained and educated volunteers, they become advocates for your organization and your animals. They'll tell their friends, neighbors, coworkers, and others about the power and fun of obedience training—and about the fabulous dogs of all breeds available at their local shelter. AS

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