

Socializing



Implementing a fairly simple in-house behavior program will quickly allow an animal shelter to save more lives. Socializing dogs and cats will improve disposition, calm frightened animals, and improve their adoptability. By contrast, animals who sit in their kennels and cages for extended periods of time tend to develop anti-social barrier behaviors.

Behavior improvement protocols can be implemented in both private and municipal shelters, with the support of staff and volunteers. Such a program also involves the help of the public. All shelters should welcome the public to interact with the animals even for the sole purpose of “window shopping.” Potential adopters and visitors provide needed socialization for the animals as well as an opportunity to gain potential future adoptions and word of mouth publicity for available animals.

Following are some simple techniques for providing socialization and improving shelter animal behavior:

- Give dogs a daily walk on a leash, daily play in a

fenced area, and daily socialization including brushing, petting, and “people” time.

- Cats should be allowed to roam free in a room for some period of time every day. They should also receive daily brushing, petting, and “people” time.
- As volunteers and staff work with dogs, have them record observations in a computer or handwritten log. Note things like activity level, ability to follow simple commands, favorite games or toys, interaction with other dogs, and any progress made or problems noticed. This information comes in handy for the next socializer, and is particularly helpful when matching the dog with a new adopter.
- Just like people, dogs and cats benefit from a change in visual environment. Change them to a different kennel every day or every couple of days to provide a new view and new neighbors to investigate.
- Use meal time to stimulate mental and physical activity: some dogs can benefit from having some of their food delivered via a Kong toy. This helps them focus on something besides their kennel situation, and provides a mental challenge.
- Foster homes can give a dog or cat a break from the shelter. (Note: they will still be promoted as available for adoption on the website, adoption referral websites such as Petfinder, offsite adoption venues, and a binder of available foster animals with photographs at the shelter.)
- Shy or fearful dogs and cats can also benefit from time in a foster home where they can get comfortable with different people or situations. But shelters can also help shy and fearful dogs and cats in the shelter. The most common types of fears are social shyness, situational fears, and fears of certain noises. Generally, the best way to handle these cases is to begin with a very mild exposure combined with a fun or positive association. Over time, the exposure can be increased until the animal is comfortable.
- Daily training in simple commands (sit, stay, come) or rehabilitation, including clicker training whenever possible.

Animals in Shelters

Since socialization is crucial for dogs and cats in shelters, it is important to have volunteers who understand that the animals are relying on them. Volunteers should be required to sign up for particular days and shifts, instead of allowing them to come in whenever they want so that the animals get their full regiment of socialization each and every day. (In other words, create a master volunteer shift assignment schedule that allows the shelter to meet its programmatic goals such as out-of-kennel time for dogs and cats.)

Minimal Mental Health Requirements for Shelter Dogs:

- A comfortable bed or den.
- At least three daily opportunities to use a dog toilet area (outside of their kennel) and be rewarded for using it.
- Sufficient entertainment (environmental enrichment) and stuffed chew toys such as Kongs.
- Some hand feeding.
- Interaction with new people each day.
- Daily education (basic manners training) and mental stimulation (walks).
- At least 20 minutes out of their kennel run each day, used either for training, socialization, playtime, exercise or "down time" in somebody's office.
- Canine companionship—either housing with other dogs, or daily 20 minute play/training sessions.
- Puppies under four months must be housed together in a self-training, long-term confinement area, with constant access to a puppy toilet area. Puppies require daily handling, grooming, and manners training by multiple people. Puppies should be fostered if not immediately available for adoption.

Modified from www.openpaw.org

Minimal Mental Health Requirements for Shelter Cats:

- A warm clean environment with access to a comfortable hiding place.
- A separate litter box area.
- A litter box that is cleaned regularly (feces removed immediately when noticed).
- A convenient scratching post with suspended toys.
- Interaction with unfamiliar people daily.
- Daily handling and grooming.
- Feline companionship for social cats (group housing).
- Kittens under four months should be housed together in a self-training, long-term confinement area, with constant access to a scratching surface with suspended toys and to a separate litter box area. Kittens require daily handling and grooming by multiple people.

