

Canine Temperament: A Prescriptive Approach

The innovative AKC Temperament Test utilizes modern behavior-analysis techniques.

By Mary R. Burch, Ph.D.

Research shows that early temperament testing can be predictive of later adult behavior in police and military K-9s.

US ARMY PHOTO

FEATURE

Canine temperament is an important consideration for all dog owners. The [AKC Temperament Test](#) provides owners insight into their dog's temperament and assists them in addressing behavioral issues, thereby enhancing their relationship and enriching the lives of their canine companions. An extensive review of the canine temperament literature was completed prior to the development of the AKC Temperament Test. This led to the publication of an article in the *International Journal of Comparative Psychology*.

Canine temperament testing has historically been linked to the predictability of future behavior. A predictive model of canine-temperament testing assumes that a dog's behavior in one situation will likely be similar to its behavior in a variety of other situations.

The AKC Temperament Test (ATT) was launched

in August 2019. The ATT offered the first prescriptive model for canine temperament testing. The ATT can reveal areas in which a dog might fail to perform certain test items, but by using modern behavior-analysis tech-

niques, the behavior can be modified through a prescriptive approach.

The topic of canine temperament testing has been investigated by researchers for several decades. Multiple temperament tests were

developed after the publication of the landmark 1965 book *Genetics and Social Behavior of the Dog* (Scott & Fuller) that described canine-temperament research conducted in a laboratory setting.

In the early history of tem-

perament testing, temperament tests were viewed as having a predictive nature. For example, if a dog passed a temperament test for guide dogs when it was a puppy, knowing if the dog was going to be suitable as a guide dog

when it was an adult would be advantageous. Similarly, if a young dog who was a potential police dog was afraid of loud noises, when considering a career for the dog, it would be helpful to know if the dog would continue to balk at the noise of gunshot throughout its adult life.

PREDICTING BEHAVIOR

Recent research shows that the question "Can early temperament tests predict the behavior of adult dogs" is far more complex than a simple yes-no. There are conflicting findings and inconsistencies with regard to the results of predictive temperament tests.

For predictive studies, the results may depend on which variables (such as the age of the dog) are being evaluated. A number of predictive studies indicated that puppy tests did not predict adult suitability for service dog work or police work, and several researchers found that there



Temperament tests developed in 1965 by John Paul Scott and John Fuller were laboratory based.



Service dogs require expert screening and extensive professional training, and the process to prepare them for work is costly.

was no predictive value when pet dogs were first tested as puppies and later as adults.

In contrast to studies of predictive temperament tests that show no predictive validity, there is also research related to service and guide dogs that shows temperament testing can be used to predict

future success in training programs, and certain behaviors or traits result in dogs being dismissed from training programs. These include pulling excessively on the leash and fear and reactivity.

Police and military dogs have been the subjects of research that shows early

temperament testing can be predictive of later adult behavior. Specifically, confidence and engagement were predictive measures of the success as a working dog.

Based on a review of canine temperament research, we can conclude that temperament may be more likely to

be predictive when testing is done with certain categories of dogs, including police/military dogs and service/guide dogs. Possible reasons for this include that these dogs are often tested at a later age, they have often received training that is administered by a very specific protocol, and they are often raised in a kennel or by trained puppy raisers where socialization and training procedures are consistent day after day.

This is very different than what happens with a litter of pet dogs who as early as 8 weeks old may be sent by a breeder to eight different homes where they are raised and trained (or not) under circumstances with a great deal of variability. Service dogs and police/military dogs are unique in that they must be well-screened to optimize chances of success, they require extensive training by skilled trainers, and the process to prepare them for their work is costly.

For these dogs, any process, such as a temperament test that is predictive, is one measure that can be combined with others to ensure potential problems are identified before an organization invests considerable time and resources in training a dog. For pet dogs, in some respects, the stakes are not quite as high. Because training is not as costly, the owners of pet dogs do not have to be as efficient with regard to time as specialty trainers (e.g., police and guide dog trainers). As a result, dog owners can take the time to train their pet dogs and provide rehabilitation and training to rescue and shelter dogs.

MODIFYING BEHAVIOR

The AKC Temperament Test (ATT) employs a prescriptive approach to temperament testing in which dog owners are encouraged to use the test to identify problems related to their dogs' reactions to specific stimuli and then

remediate these problems. The ATT provides an educational tool for evaluating the temperament of pet dogs for dog owners and breeders.

When a prescriptive training protocol is successfully completed after a dog has failed the ATT, the dog's temperament has not been changed because it can now perform a test item correctly. Rather, behaviors related to temperament have been modified. An example related to humans would be a person who is painfully shy learning to do public speaking as a result of coaching. Most likely, the person is still basically shy, but adaptive, practical skills have been learned that make overcoming the shyness possible.

The prescriptive temperament test model seen in the ATT has definite value. In addition to testing, information on how the owner can work with problem behaviors is provided by the AKC here.

Dogs can overcome behavioral issues that may have



Temperament is a crucial consideration in therapy work.

been a barrier to going into the community with the owner (e.g., extremely fearful).

With regard to temperament testing, clearly, the development of an individual dog's temperament will depend on the environment in which the dog is raised and the socialization and training that is provided. With the exception of dogs that are housed and raised in ken-

nels for specialty training or research purposes, training history, socialization experiences, and methods of raising are likely to vary greatly from one dog to the next.

Temperament tests that have been traditionally used for predicting the future behavior of dogs can coexist with a prescriptive test such as the AKC Temperament Test. A beneficiary of the

prescriptive model of temperament testing is the dog. Dogs who are afraid to greet unfamiliar people, walk on unusual surfaces, and become extremely alarmed at unexpected auditory and visual stimuli to the point that they don't recover during testing, are likely to have lower quality lives that are severely impacted by fear.

Helping dogs overcome temperament issues can result in both an improvement in their welfare and an enhanced relationship with their owners. It is hoped that the prescriptive nature of the ATT coupled with the behavioral information provided will help dog owners train their dogs and address any behavioral issues, thereby enriching the lives of our canine companions.—**M.R.B.**

This is a summary of an article published in the [International Journal of Comparative Psychology](#).

About the ATT

Temperament has been defined as an animal's personality, makeup, disposition, or nature. A longer definition of temperament is "individual differences in behavior that are biologically based." Temperament is not learned.

In the past several decades, there has been an increase in dog-trainer knowledge about behavior. We now know that behavioral procedures can be effectively used to modify behaviors (such as fearful reactions) that may be related to temperament. Considering that we can change behaviors often related to temperament (such as when a dog refuses to walk on an unfamiliar surface), temperament can be defined as an individual's natural predisposition to react in a certain way to a stimulus. Behaviors related to temperament may be modified over time with exposure and learning.

The AKC Temperament Test allows a dog's owner to determine how close a purebred dog's temperament is to its breed standard. For mixed-breeds, taking the ATT may provide insight about the temperament of an individual dog. The test provides information about a dog's reactions to a variety of stimuli (objects or events that can be detected by an animal's senses). The six categories of stimuli are Social, Auditory, Visual, Tactile, Proprioceptive (motion), and Unexpected Stimulus.

The ATT can identify behaviors related to temperament that can be addressed through training. If a dog passes the ATT twice, under two different evaluators, the owner may apply for the ATT suffix title.

Bonus Video

[ATT testing at Cleveland All-Breed Benefit](#)



The ATT employs a prescriptive approach to canine-temperament testing.