

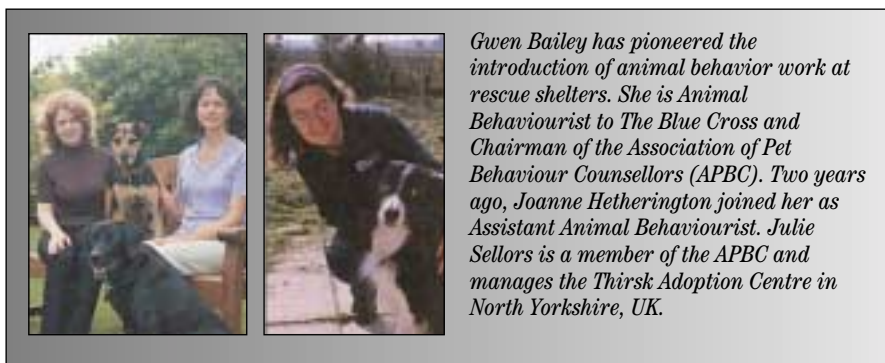
Successful rescue dog placement in combination with behavioral counselling

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INTRODUCTION

The Blue Cross is a British animal welfare charity that rehomes over 3000 dogs a year. For the past 8 years, it has employed a full time Animal Behaviourist whose aim has been to incorporate behavioral knowledge into the rehoming procedures in an effort to attain the highest standards of welfare.

A full behavioral service is offered at the Burford Centre in Oxfordshire, which operates in four main areas. These are to provide:

- Advice to improve behavior of dogs kennelled at adoption centers.
- Assistance in matching of dogs to owners.
- Post-adoption advice for all rehomed Blue Cross dogs.
- Advice for all problem dog owners considering giving up their pet due to unwanted behavior.

Few dogs are ever rejected from the Centre. Those that are include only dogs that are considered very dangerous or pose a threat to the staff. Once they are admitted into the kennels, all dogs are subject to a period of assessment during which time they are monitored for health and behavior. Very few (<1.1%) are euthanatized for behavioral reasons. Dogs that have successfully passed this assessment period are considered suitable as pets, and the staff tries to get them adopted into an appropriate home. New owners are then

provided with as much advice and support as they need.

AIMS OF THE SURVEY

The main aim of the survey was to find out how many dogs adopted from the Centre in Oxfordshire in 1995 were still in their homes 1 year later. In addition, the Centre wished to ascertain whether or not new owners were happy with their chosen pet. It was hoped that this information would allow the Centre to determine if the policy of admitting, assessing, and subsequently rehoming the dogs offered to the Centre was successful or not. For example, it was considered important to discover whether the dogs had settled into their homes and the community in the 12 months since rehoming or whether the system only appeared to work and that dogs that caused significant problems in their new homes had been rehomed again or euthanatized.

The survey also aimed to determine whether the new owners had observed behavior problems with their pet, how severe these problems were, and whether these had been successfully resolved.

METHODS

The owners of all dogs rehomed from the Burford Blue Cross Centre in 1995 were contacted by questionnaire. Those failing to return the questionnaire were followed up with a telephone call. Owners who could not be contacted were classified as 'lost to follow-up'.

The level of successful adoption was calculated by asking owners three questions:

- Had the dogs fitted well into their home?
- Had they ever regretted their decision to adopt the dog?
- Would they make the same choice of dog again?

RESULTS

Dogs ranged from 8 weeks to 11 years of age and were pure-bred, mixed breed, or cross-bred. All adult dogs were neutered before rehoming.

From 403 dog rehoming procedures carried out at Burford Blue Cross in 1995, feedback was received from 355 (88.1%) of adopters. Forty-eight (11.9%) were lost to follow-up. Of the 355 adopters followed-up, there were 289 (81.4%) dogs still in their original placement homes. Sixty-six (18.6%) dogs were no longer in their original placement homes. Of these 66 dogs, 29 (8.2% of all dogs) were euthanatized for medical conditions, died of illness or old age, or were returned for non-behavioral reasons such as family separation. Thirty seven (10.4%) dogs were returned, euthanatized, or rehomed by their owner for behavioral reasons such as aggression to the family, interdog aggression, intractable separation anxiety, and destructive behavior when left. These results are summarized in **Table 1**.

Of the 66 dogs no longer in homes 40 were returned to the Centre and 26 died, were euthanatized, or rehomed by the owners. Of the returned adoptions, 37 dogs were returned once and 3 dogs were returned twice. Thirty-eight of these dogs have subsequently been rehomed successfully, and the two remaining returns were waiting for a new home at the time of the survey.

With regard to the success of placement, it was found that 282 (97.6% of dogs still in homes) dogs had owners who were happy with their selection 1 year later. When this figure is combined with the dogs





Accurate assessment of dogs' characters ensures correct placement with appropriate families.

that were successfully placed but that died or were returned due to unforeseen circumstances, it is apparent that 311 dogs (87.6%) were successfully rehomed first time.

One hundred and sixty (55.4%) adopters experienced behavioral problems with their

dogs within the first 6 months of adoption. This number fell to 102 (35.3%) after 6 months, the majority of which were minor problems. The incidence and severity of problems are recorded in **Table 2**. It is interesting to note that out of the 5 owners still experiencing severe problems after 6 months, none actually regretted taking on the dog.

In summary, 93.8% of dogs were successfully rehomed using The Blue Cross system. Only 22 placements were unsuccessful. Eleven dogs were euthanatized for behavioral reasons, seven owners were unhappy with their choice of dog, and two dogs were rehomed by their owners for behavioral reasons. Two dogs were still awaiting placement at the time of the survey.

DISCUSSION

The welfare implications from this survey are far-reaching and suggest that only a relatively small percentage of rescue dogs need to be euthanatized for behavioral reasons.

Rescue centers have a number of

constraints such as size of the operation, the demand for kennel space, the availability of new homes, staffing logistics, and funding. In response to these constraints, rescue centers have a number of choices. They could be selective so as to ensure that all dogs could be rehomed with ease. In practical terms this would mean that problem dogs would be refused. Alternatively, rescue kennels could adopt a policy of admitting all dogs and either keeping problem dogs indefinitely, or euthanatizing a high proportion of them. Finally, they could choose to rehome all dogs, whatever their behavior, in effect passing all responsibility to the new owner.

However, the study described above suggests that The Blue Cross has been able to implement a policy that seems to offer both rescue dogs and owners the best possible chance. The behavioral service serves to maximize the rehoming success of its rescue dogs. Potentially difficult dogs are rehomed into the community, but this is done with the full knowledge of those who decide to take them on. With behavioral support, the majority of these animals can make good pets, including those which have been problematic in the past. A good working knowledge of dog behavior enables staff to judge which are likely to be too difficult or dangerous to go into the community and which may be rehomed successfully. Potential owners are told about any problems as soon as they express an interest in that dog and receive advice and support for as long as they need it.

The results from this survey suggest that even though many owners may experience some type of behavioral problem with their dog, the majority are happy with their chosen pet 1 year after adoption. Many owners commented favorably on the behavioral advice they were given before and after they adopted their dog. From the point of view of the dogs being taken into care, as many as possible were accepted and placed, and 93.8% of those adopted found their way into an appropriate home.

Table 1
Summary of the reasons for return of dogs no longer in their original placement homes

	<i>Number of dogs</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Behavioral reason</i>	<i>Non-behavioral reason</i>	
Number returned to the Centre	24 (6.8%)	16 (4.5%)	40
Number rehomed by owner	2 (0.5%)	3 (0.85%)	5
Number euthanatized	11 (3.1%)	3 (0.85%)	14
Number died	—	7 (2.0%)	7
Totals	37 (10.4%)	29 (8.2%)	66

Table 2
Summary of the incidence and severity of behavioral problems of the dogs still in the original placement homes

	<i>Number of dogs</i>				<i>Totals</i>
	<i>No problem reported</i>	<i>Minor problem only</i>	<i>Moderate problems</i>	<i>Serious problems reported</i>	
Problems up to 6 months from placement	129 (44.6%)	75 (25.9%)	66 (22.9%)	19 (6.6%)	289
Problems persisting after 6 months	187 (64.7%)	86 (29.8%)	11 (3.8%)	5 (1.7%)	289

Notes

Minor problem
Behavior not serious enough to disrupt family life or require further therapy

Moderate problem
Behavior problem serious enough to seek therapy

Serious problem
Behavior serious enough to disrupt family life