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# SAFER Canine Assessment – Session Three

## Scoring ASPCA's SAFER<sup>®</sup> Assessment



# Your Presenter



**Heather Mohan-Gibbons,  
MS, RVT, ACAAB, CBCC-KA**  
Director,  
Applied Research and  
Behavior  
ASPCA

# Summary Part 1 & 2

## Session One

Research & history  
Overview

## Session Two

Requirements for assessment room  
Equipment needed to perform SAFER  
Handler's & Observer's role  
Handling highlights of each item



Note: All sessions are recorded and available on [ASPCApro.org](http://ASPCApro.org). A link to Part 1, 2 and 3 will be emailed following this presentation

# Agenda (Part 3 of 4 series)



SAFER overview

Choice during assessment

Behavioral profile

Objective observations

Scoring

Safety nets



# Aggression Assessment

## Aggressive behavior:

- encompasses a range of behaviors that usually begins with warnings and can culminate in an attack
- Behavior is malleable (temperament is not)

## Assessment:

- Objective observation of body language gives a score on each item (1-5)
- Gradient of resources for live outcome (not a test and no pass/fail, no “unadoptable” language)

# SAFER

**S**afety

**A**ssessment

**F**or

**E**valuating

**R**e-homing

It is a re-homing and adoption program by design

# SAFER

Not breed specific, rather based in individual behaviors

Supports fearful and anxious dogs to a live outcome (video at end)

Appropriate for use in humane society, municipal, no-kill, rescue, disaster...



# Choice and Assessing

- an abundance or variety from which to choose
- an alternative option (when assessing)



# Choice and Assessing

- Aggressive behaviors increase when choice decreases



# SAFER Assessment Items

Each assessment item ensures choice maintained by:

- loose leash
- pull body away
- escape route for dog and assessor



# Choice and Assessing

- Give choice when assessing
  - See more diverse behavior
  - Reduce defensive behaviors/bites
  - Dog can clearly communicate
- Consider giving more choices
  - When approaching a kennel
  - Putting on a leash, etc.



# How is SAFER used?

Part of placement profile

- Adoption
- Rescue
- Foster

Intake tool

Prevention breed bans

Private consults

Just one piece of the puzzle to guide live outcome





# “Behavioral profile”

Think for a moment of all the ways you are currently gathering information about a dog in your agency (ex: ACO, vet...)

**Please share one of those ways by typing in the chat.**

# “Behavioral profile”

Animal control report

Owner history

Information from other agencies or your own (return)

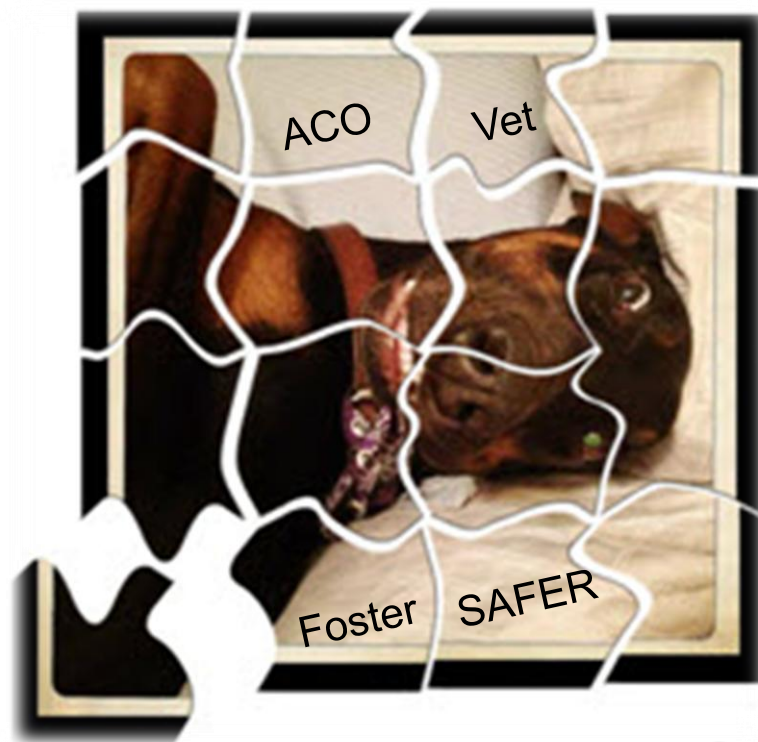
Medical evaluation

Behavior team

Staff & volunteer interactions

Potential adopters

Foster



# Scoring Language

- Language we use is crucial
  - Often riddled with assumptions and our own perceptions
- Lead to misunderstandings
  - When describing the dog to adopters
  - During interactions with staff
  - When placing with rescue

# Subjective vs. Objective



## Subjective:

- arising out of one's perception of one's own states and processes
- labels the animal

*“That dog is happy”*

## Objective:

- expressing facts or conditions without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations
- describes a behavior

*“This dog has his ears back, soft eyes, and an open mouth”*

# Objective Observations

- Labeling leads to black and white answers
- Instead describe objective behavior
- Behavior falls on a spectrum



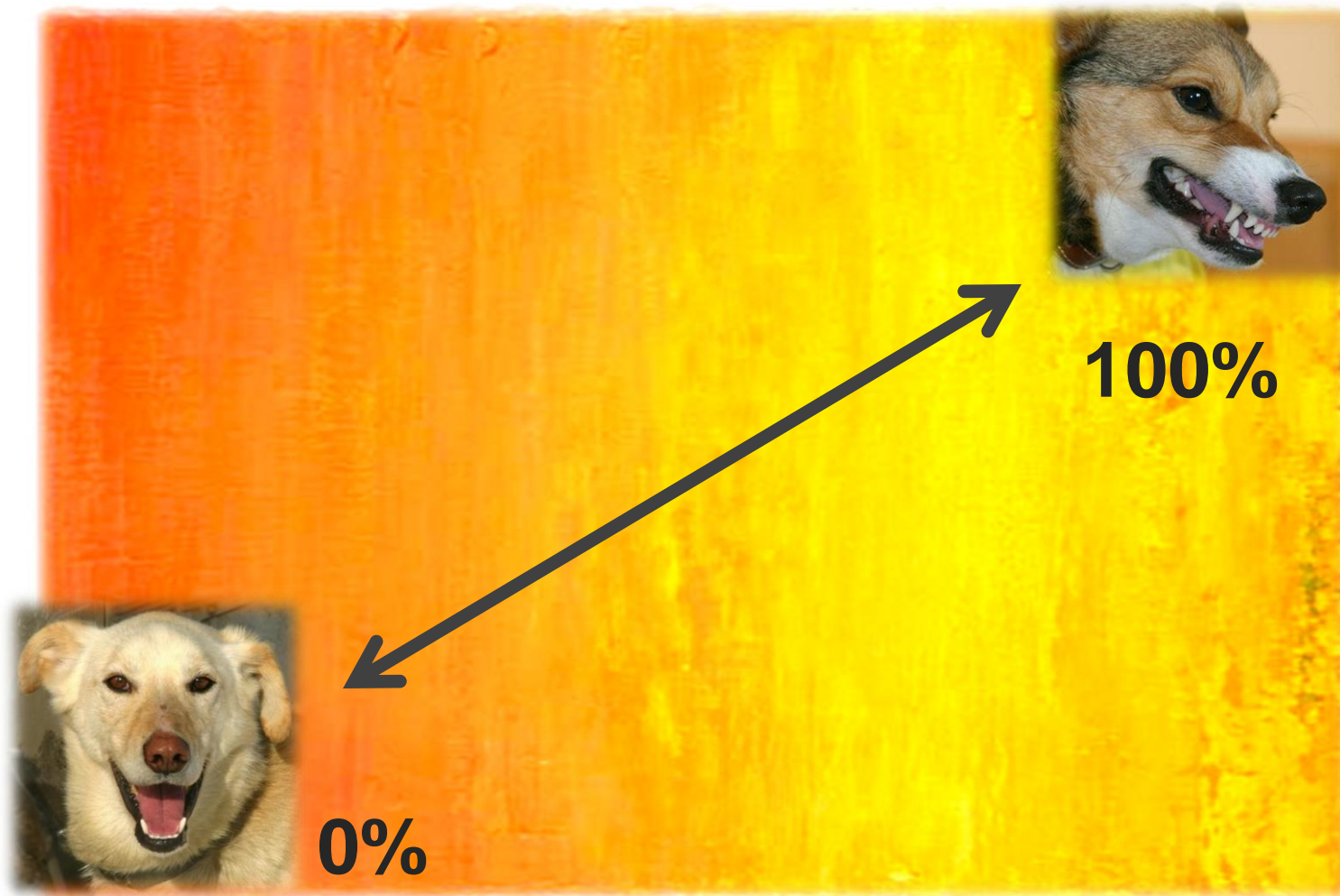
*Photo credit: Home Depot*

# Behavior has few absolutes!



# Behavior has few absolutes!

## Assessment on spectrum of probability: 0-100%



# Scoring

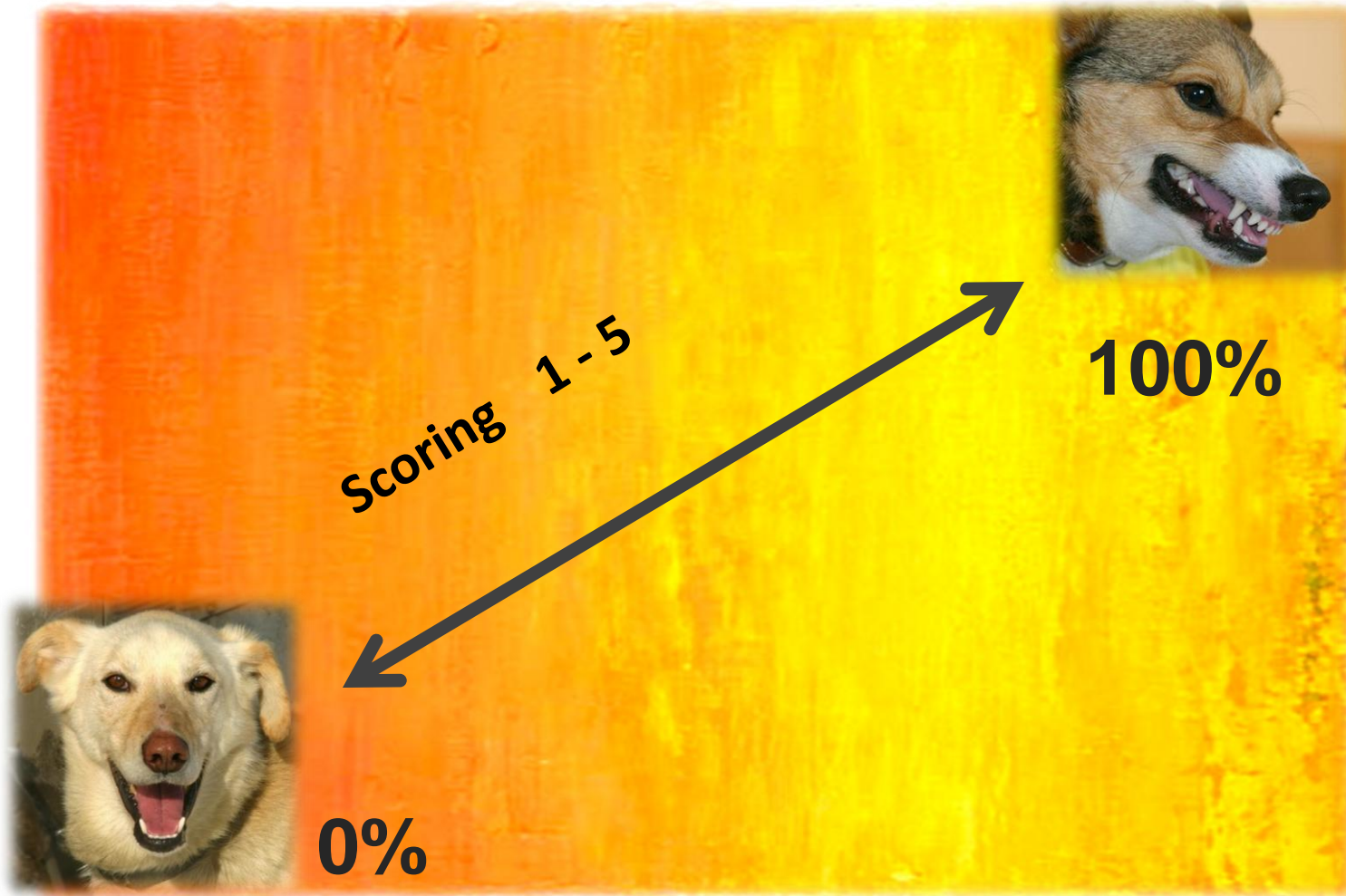
Due to the array of possibilities, scoring behavior falls on a scale of loosest to stiffer body language.





**Behavior has no absolutes!**

**Behavior is on spectrum of probability: 0-100%**



# Scoring 1-5

Behaviors don't always fit perfectly in one box

Choose "Best Fit"

1  
2  
3  
4  
5

item 1 – look:																	
	Dog leans forward or jumps up to lick the Assessor's face with tail wagging, ears back and eyes averted. [Enter "1"]																
X	Dog's eyes are averted, with tail wagging and ears back. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "1"]																
	Dog holds gaze with soft eyes, soft body. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. Dog holds gaze for three full seconds. [Enter "1"]																
	Dog's eyes are averted. His ears are back, his tail is down, and he has a relaxed body posture. Dog allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "1"]																
	Dog's eyes are averted. His body posture is stiff and fearful, his tail is low and not moving. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "2"]																
	Dog pulls out of Assessor's hands each time without settling during three repetitions. [Enter "2"]																
	Dog jumps on the Assessor, consistently rubs his shoulder on the Assessor, and will not allow Assessor to conduct the assessment. [Enter "3"]																
	Dog holds eye contact while remaining motionless with ears forward. His body is stiff and becomes stiffer as assessment progresses. [Enter "4"]																
	Dog freezes and/or growls or tries to bite. [Enter "5"]																
<p>If aggression is noted, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog's response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols).</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Freeze</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Ears back</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Dog growls</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Snaps no contact</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Tail up</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward</td> <td></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Tail down</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		<input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff	<input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes	<input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth	<input type="checkbox"/> Freeze	<input type="checkbox"/> Ears back	<input type="checkbox"/> Dog growls	<input type="checkbox"/> Snaps no contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Tail up	<input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward		<input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite	<input type="checkbox"/> Tail down			
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<input type="checkbox"/> Tail down																	

*Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:*

# Scoring

Glossary in SAFER guidebook & on ASPCApro.org

- Defines behavior for common language (“play, freeze, etc”)

Handling details are in SAFER Webinar Session 2 & Guidebook

Let’s do an overview of scoring



# Look



# item 1 – look:

	Dog leans forward or jumps up to lick the Assessor's face with tail wagging, ears back and eyes averted. [Enter "1"]
X	Dog's eyes are averted, with tail wagging and ears back. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "1"]
	Dog holds gaze with soft eyes, soft body. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. Dog holds gaze for three full seconds. [Enter "1"]
	Dog's eyes are averted. His ears are back, his tail is down, and he has a relaxed body posture. Dog allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "1"]
	Dog's eyes are averted. His body posture is stiff and fearful, his tail is low and not moving. He allows head to be held loosely in Assessor's cupped hands. [Enter "2"]
	Dog pulls out of Assessor's hands each time without settling during three repetitions. [Enter "2"]
	Dog jumps on the Assessor, consistently rubs his shoulder on the Assessor, and will not allow Assessor to conduct the assessment. [Enter "3"]
	Dog holds eye contact while remaining motionless with ears forward. His body is stiff and becomes stiffer as assessment progresses. [Enter "4"]
	Dog freezes and/or growls or tries to bite. [Enter "5"]

**If aggression is noted**, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog's response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols).

- |                                     |                                       |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard    | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes  | <input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freeze     | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears back    | <input type="checkbox"/> Dog growls | <input type="checkbox"/> Snaps no contact |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail up    | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward |                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail down  |                                       |                                     |   |

*Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:*

# Sensitivity



## item 2 – sensitivity:

	Dog leans into the Assessor, eyes soft or squinty, soft and loose body, open mouth. [Enter “1”]																
X	Dog stands still and accepts the touch, his eyes are averted, and his tail is in neutral position with relaxed body posture. Dog’s mouth is likely closed for at least a portion of the assessment item. [Enter “1”]																
	Dog displays high energy and movement, but it is directed toward getting closer to the Assessor. His body is soft, likely panting, may jump up between attempts to lick Assessor. [Enter “2”]																
	Dog is active and focused on the Assessor and all other stimuli available. His body is soft, likely panting, likely to display high movement between attempts. [Enter “2”]																
	Dog stands still and accepts the touch, his eyes are averted, his tail is between his legs, body stiff, mouth closed, lip long, ears likely back, may lip lick. [Enter “2”]																
	Dog repeatedly turns toward the Assessor’s hand, with loose body and open mouth, mouths the hand, but does not apply pressure. Or, dog licks hands while lips are long. [Enter “2”]																
	Dog is not fearful and is struggling to get away. The dog is not focused and is in constant movement, unconnected to the Assessor. [Enter “3”]																
	Dog stands tall and square. His tail perpendicular to spine, mouth closed for the majority of assessment item. [Enter “3”]																
	Dog repeatedly turns toward the Assessor’s hand with a very fast head movement. If able, he muzzle punches the hand. His body is stiff and he has a closed mouth with a short lip. [Enter “4”]																
	Dog freezes, growls or tries to bite. [Enter “5”]																
<p><b>If aggression is noted</b>, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog’s response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols).</p>																	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Tail up	<input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward		<input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite														
<input type="checkbox"/> Tail down																	

*Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:*

Lip licked

# Tag





## item 3 – tag:

	Dog assumes play position and joins the game. Or dog indicates play with huffing, soft ‘popping’ of the body, etc. Dog might jump on Assessor once play begins. [Enter “1”]																
	Dog stands with his tail low and wagging, and comes toward the Assessor in a friendly manner when the Assessor ceases moving. [Enter “1”]																
	Follows at end of leash, body soft, or low and a bit fearful. [Enter “1”]																
	Dog is fearful but unresponsive when touched. Approaches the Assessor when the game ends. Dog is likely crouching, may have long lip or lip lick. [Enter “2”]																
X	Dog is not fearful but is unresponsive to the Assessor, and approaches the Assessor at the end of the game (may need coaxing to approach). He is focused on stimuli other than the Assessor. [Enter “2”]																
	Dog repeatedly turns quickly away when touched, or repeatedly spins toward the touch, and repeatedly tries to exit. Dog may be crouching, tail is tucked, mouth closed, body stiff. [Enter “3”]																
	Dog responds with his tail high, ears forward, mouth likely closed for at least half of the assessment item, body stiff and body checks the Assessor. Dog is often focused on other stimuli in the room. [Enter “3”]																
	Dog panics with vocalization combined with tail tuck, yelping and repeatedly trying to exit. (If dog settles after 1st or 2nd tag, choose 1st “3” scoring option). [Enter “4”]																
	Dog stands his ground while not cornered and barks at the Assessor with ears forward, body stiff, mouth closed and lips pursed when not barking. [Enter “4”]																
	Dog growls or tries to bite. [Enter “5”]																
<p><b>If aggression is noted</b>, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog’s response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols).</p>																	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff	<input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes	<input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth														
<input type="checkbox"/> Freeze	<input type="checkbox"/> Ears back	<input type="checkbox"/> Dog growls	<input type="checkbox"/> Snaps no contact														
<input type="checkbox"/> Tail up	<input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward		<input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite														
<input type="checkbox"/> Tail down																	

*Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:*

# Squeeze



## item 4 – squeeze:

### if paw is used:

First Attempt	Second Attempt	
X	X	Dog gently pulls back his paw. <del>Dog may lick hand.</del> [Enter “1”]
		Dog does not respond at all for three seconds. His eyes are averted and his ears are relaxed or back. [Enter “1”]
		Dog gently pulls back and whimpers. [Enter “2”]
		Dog gently places his open mouth over the Assessor’s hand without applying pressure. [Enter “2”]
		Dog closes mouth, becomes stiff. [Enter “3”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog is soft in body and eye, and moves his legs/body so that the Assessor is unable to hold the paw [Enter “3”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog yelps repeatedly or screams. [Enter “3”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog head flips while pulling back paw. [Enter “3”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog reaches toward the Assessor’s hand on the second attempt while moving his paw away when the Assessor attempts to lift it. The dog will not allow the Assessor to assess second time. [Enter “4”] Note: If this behavior occurs on first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog growls. [Enter “4”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.
		Dog freezes and/or tries to bite. [Enter “5”] Note: If this behavior occurs on the first attempt, use the flank instead.

# Food Behavior



## item 5 – food behavior:

X	Dog lifts head and ceases eating when you reach to pull the bowl away or push him out. [Enter “1”]
	Dog calmly allows the food to be moved, follows the dish, but does not interfere with the dish’s movement. Dog’s body is soft and loose, eyes soft, tail neutral. He lifts his head when hand is pushed against his cheek. [Enter “1”]
	Dog follows the dish with his tail down, body likely a bit stiff. Dog lifts head after a bit of pressure from hand to cheek. [Enter “2”]
	Dog follows the dish, his tail between his legs, ears are forward. His body is stiff. Dog does not lift his head from the bowl when hand is applied to his cheek. [Enter “3”]
	Dog gulps food, begins to eat faster and with bigger bites, body stiff. He does not lift head when hand is applied to cheek. [Enter “3”]
	Dog freezes and/or growls. [Enter “4”]
	Dog tries to bite. (Use chart on the worksheet to identify level of bite attempt/bite.) [Enter “5”]

If aggression is noted, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog’s response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols)

- |                                     |  |   |   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body block | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears back     | <input type="checkbox"/> Paws in bowl     | <input type="checkbox"/> Snaps at hand (no contact) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward  | <input type="checkbox"/> Urinates in bowl | <input type="checkbox"/> Repeated contact bite      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freeze     | <input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard     | <input type="checkbox"/> Bites bowl       | <input type="checkbox"/> Leaves bowl to bite hand   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail up    | <input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth |   | <input type="checkbox"/> Bites up Assess-a-Hand®    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail down  | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes     |   |   |

*Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:*

# Toy & Rawhide



## item 6 – toy behavior:

Toys only	Rawhide (if used)	
	X	No interest. [Enter “1”]
		Dog settles down close to chew, will relinquish toy or rawhide to you. [Enter “1”]
X		Dog settles close, keeps a firm grip and is loose and wiggly. He does not place his body between you and the toy/rawhide. [Enter “1”]
		Dog takes toy away, keeps a firm hold. His body is between you and the toy or rawhide, and he is loose and wiggly. No growling or stiffness. [Enter “2”]
		Dog takes toy/rawhide away, keeps a firm hold. His body is stiff. [Enter “3”]
		Dog freezes and/or growls. [Enter “4”]
		Dog attempts bite (use chart on worksheet) [Enter “5”]

If aggression is noted, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog’s response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols)

- |                                     |  |  |   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body block | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears back     | <input type="checkbox"/> Paws on toy     | <input type="checkbox"/> Snaps at hand (no contact) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward  | <input type="checkbox"/> Urinates on toy | <input type="checkbox"/> Repeated contact bite      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freeze     | <input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Leaves toy to bite hand    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail up    | <input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Bites up Assess-a-Hand     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail down  | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes     |  |   |

**Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:**

Sniffed rawhide

# Dog-to-Dog Snapshot





## item 7 – dog-to-dog behavior:

	Dog approaches the helper dog in play position. His mouth is open. [Enter “1”]
	Dog approaches the helper dog submissively (head low, tail low, ears back, lip long). [Enter “1”]
X	Dog approaches helper dog with tail at spine level, body not stiff, ears relaxed, lip long or neutral. [Enter “2”]
	Dog does not approach the helper dog. Turns body to side in relation to other dog, or exits. [Enter “2”]
	Dog approaches the helper dog, body soft, tail well above spine level, ears forward. [Enter “2”]
	Dog approaches the helper dog by rushing in with his tail high, stiff body, head tall, and ears erect. [Enter “3”]
	Dog charges the helper dog while growling or attempting to bite. [Enter “4”]

If aggression is noted, use the checklist below to evaluate the dog’s response. You can use this information to help best guide the behavior team regarding potential behavior modification and management (see guide for protocols).

- |                                     |                                       |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freeze     | <input type="checkbox"/> Eyes soft    | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocalizes  | <input type="checkbox"/> Exposes teeth    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body soft  | <input type="checkbox"/> Eyes hard    | <input type="checkbox"/> Dog growls | <input type="checkbox"/> Snaps no contact |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Body stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears back    |                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to bite |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail up    | <input type="checkbox"/> Ears forward |                                     |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tail down  |                                       |                                     |   |

***Behaviors observed before, during or after the item:***

Buster licked the lips of the other dog when he approached. Tail raised a bit above spine level after initial greet.

# Scores at a Glance

	Look	Sensitivity	Tag	Squeeze 1	Squeeze 2	Food	Toy	Rawhide	Dog
1									
2									
3		P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
4	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	P
5	S	S	S	S	R	R	R	R	

For each item, mark an 'x' in the box that intersects with the score for that item.  
 (Ex.: If the Sensitivity item has a score of "2", put an "x" in the box where row "2" and "Sensitivity" intersect.)

## Legend:

**P** = Potential behavior modification and/or management

**R** = Behavior modification and/or management strongly recommended

**S** = STOP item for safety reasons. Behavior modification and/or management strongly recommended.  
 Move to food if SOP suggests

**General observations and recommendations:**

# Scoring

- Try not getting stuck on one aspect of body language (ear,mouth,tail,etc)
- Whole body and context to assess



# Context!

When did behavior occur?



*FriendsPhoto.com*

# “Luna”

	Look	Sensitivity	Tag	Squeeze 1	Squeeze 2	Food	Toy	Rawhide	Dog
1	X		X	X	X		X		X
2		X						X	
3		P	P	P	P	X <sup>P</sup>	P	P	
4	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	P
5	S	S	S	S	R	R	R	R	

For each item, mark an ‘x’ in the box that intersects with the score for that item.

(Ex.: If the Sensitivity item has a score of “2”, put an “x” in the box where row “2” and “Sensitivity” intersect.)

## Legend:

**P** = Potential behavior modification and/or management

**R** = Behavior modification and/or management strongly recommended

**S** = STOP item for safety reasons. Behavior modification and/or management strongly recommended.  
Move to food if SOP suggests

## General observations and recommendations:

*On the food item, Luna started eating slowly initially then increased bites (gulping) after first attempt to pull bowl away. She was stiff and assessor couldn’t push her head away from bowl with moderate pressure. She was easy to position throughout assessment .*

# Take away homework “Luna”

- Consider other information:
  - ACO, history, intake, staff & volunteer observations
- Decide what safety nets you have for a dog like Luna!
  - Call the owner?
  - Free fed for 2 days and re-asses?
  - Would size or breed make a difference in your facility & why?
  - See if behavior is seen in foster?
  - Behavior modification? in foster? in-shelter?
  - Office foster or enrichment options?
  - Rescue options?
  - Send to adoption with adopter support?
  - What kind of follow-up would you do?

# SAFER can increase live release!

decrease length of stay

decrease in euthanasia

decrease returns

increase adoptions

increase transfers



# SAFER can:

Save more dogs that are fearful and anxious in the shelter setting

Video of dog labeled as “aggressive” in shelter, now successfully living in home thanks to a “behavioral profile” including SAFER.

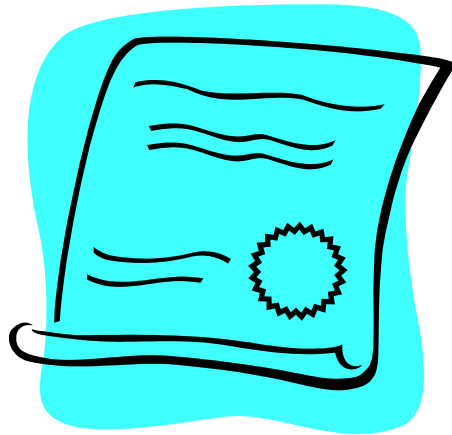




# Get SAFER Certified!

Ensures assessment is consistent and scoring is Accurate

Learn more in the last webinar of this SAFER series





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For questions regarding SAFER, certification,  
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