Integrating Shelter Pets into Homes with Resident Pets

Lindsay Hamrick, CPDT-KA, CAWA, Dir. of Shelter Outreach & Engagement

lhamrick@humanesociety.org

What we'll focus on today

- Why we can't restrict our way out of behaviorally challenging animals

- Why are so many shelters cats and dogs being restricted?

- How to shift from restrictions to short and long-term adopter support

- The nuts and bolts of slow and safe animal introductions

The problem

Restrictions on adoptable cats and dogs that prevent them from living with other pets are one of the leading indicators of long lengths of stay.

- ~73% of American families currently have at least one pet.[1]

- On average, cats and dogs are living in multiple-pet households.[2]

- Of families that do not have a pet but used to have pets, the older the person is, the less likely they are to obtain another pet.[3]

- Families without other pets are likely to be:

  - Rare, unicorn families.

  - New pet owners.

- Dogs, in particular, cannot live life in a bubble.

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Our illusion of control

We believe that by restricting shelter pets, we are preventing future stressful or unsafe situations.

However:

- People move, on average, every five years.[1]

- Nearly one in three Americans lives with at least one adult roommate who is neither their partner nor a college roommate.[2]

- Companion animals will interface with other pets while on walks, at the veterinarian's office, in training classes, and in day-to-day life, regardless of how much counseling we do.

- In general, the more isolated a pet is, the more severe an unexpected interaction with another pet may be.

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Reasons we might restrict

- Past history of fighting with other pets (Severity? Human injuries?)

- Fight in shelter environment

- Litter box challenges thought to be tied to other animals in home or shelter

- Reactivity on leash (shelter or previous home)

- Prey drive in shelter environment or with outside animals

- Resource guarding (with or without a history)

- Because they're old and we feel badly for them

- Medical concerns/arthritis/seizures

- Because they're small, because they're big, because of their perceived breed …

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Step 1: In-shelter support and training

BEHAVIOR TRACKING

- What is the pet's history *really* (if they have one).

- Remove policies that say pets who didn't get along with *one* animal can't live with *any* animals.

- Track reactivity *objectively* in the shelter environment.

- Consult with a veterinarian regarding the use of medications.

TRAINING

- Crate training/crate in kennel (dogs)

- "Look" and/or "Come" for treats (cats and dogs)

EQUIPMENT

- Train to a basket muzzle (dogs)

- Train to a gentle leader (dogs)

- Desensitize to dragging a leash

HOUSING

- Minimize the frequency of unmanaged animal reactivity in shelter.

- Take advantage of opportunities to teach a "look" command when other animals are near.

Step 2: Adopter conversations and marketing

ADOPTION BIOS

- Avoid a litany of assumptions.

- Treat each animal as an individual.

- Be honest and transparent about your concerns.

- Highlight what makes the pet awesome.

ADOPTERS WELCOME

- Conversation-based counseling

- Learn about their resident pets

- Learn about their home setup (safe room options, baby gate options, etc.)

- Learn about their experience managing a multi-animal home before

Step 3: Pre-placement introductions (dogs only)

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Introductions at the shelter may not be helpful.

- Counsel adopter *before* the intro on how it will be conducted.

- Choose a neutral, outdoor space without a lot of human or pet traffic.

- Exercise for both pups before the intro

- Distanced and parallel walking

- Assign a trained handler for the shelter pup and the owned pup so owner can observe.

- The first meeting is critical in setting a foundation for the new relationship.

- Remember the 3 D's: Distraction, Duration and Distance

- Use the skills you trained in the shelter and proper equipment.

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Step 3: Safe in-home introductions

PHASE 1
- No direct interactions (safe room, fully separated)
- Be prepared to reward both pets if accidental interactions occur.

PHASE 2
- Controlled interactions (dogs on leash, baby gates/barriers intact, parallel walking)
- Lots of breaks and rewards for nonreactivity

PHASE 3
- Supervised interactions (dogs drag leash, cats have escape route)
- More prolonged interactions, lots of rewards for non-reactivity

PHASE 4
- Unsupervised interactions (do outside chores, leave for a short time to run errands)
- Increase time left alone if no incidences.

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In-Home Introduction Support

Before bringing shelter pet home:

- In-home or virtual walk-through to determine management needs, safe rooms, ideal tether and crate locations, etc.
    - Note: This is NOT a home check. It's a free behavioral consult.

- Lend or give the adopter all necessary equipment and set it up for them
    - Crate, gentle leader, tie-down, baby gates, xpens, basket muzzle, bait bag, treats

Day of Adoption:

- Go with the owner the first time the shelter pet goes to the home and help get them set up in the safe room/area.

Adopter Support Cont'd

First 1-2 weeks:

- Assign a volunteer to help exercise the shelter pet when separated from the resident pets, including parallel walks with the resident dog/owner when ready or cat intro.

- Provide enrichment toys/puzzles to keep the shelter pet occupied

When Ready to Fully Introduce:

- Review video footage through text message to help determine when a full intro should occur

- Go back to help and troubleshoot any equipment or behavior concerns. (Ex. use of a basket muzzle)

Longer Term Support

- Provide free daycare, training classes, and consults for as long as it takes to get everyone settled

Starting a pilot program

SELECTION CRITERIA

- CATS!
- Animals who have lived successfully with other animals in the past
- Food motivation/ trainability
- Human sociability
- Young animals AND senior animals

$$$ RESOURCES

- Calculate your current animal care costs based on your average LOS for restricted animals.
- Calculate the cost of partnering with a professional trainer.
- Is a volunteer trainer or behavior program more effective post-adoption than in shelter?