**Canine Behavior Adoptability Guidelines**

# What Are They and Why Do We Have Them?

The Adoptability Guidelines describe what we believe a dog needs to be able to do, from a behavioral perspective, to successfully function in specific contexts as a companion in a pet home. Each guideline names acceptable problem behaviors, categorized as fear, arousal, and aggression, that a dog might show in specific contexts.

The purpose of the Adoptability Guidelines is to help our teams achieve as much consistency as possible regarding the pathway decisions made and the dogs placed in our communities. As behavior staff continually collect and review behavior information gathered from multiple sources throughout an animal’s stay, the Adoptability Guidelines do two main things: 1) inform contributions to pathway planning and 2) help set goals and benchmarks to track dogs’ progress in treatment.

The Adoptability Guidelines are meant to be just that: guides. Consider them guardrails that provide a structure for behavior staff to assess the behavioral adoptability of a dog alongside their organization’s behavioral capacity for care. They are not fixed criteria, nor are they meant to replace the use of behavioral expertise. Behavior is complex and dynamic, and animals are unique individuals. Behavior staff should adhere to the general philosophy of the Adoptability Guidelines, while also using sound judgment about each individual animal.

# Acceptable Problem Behaviors

* Acceptable problem behaviors reflect the behavior of the dog when they are   
  a) handled or managed by a typical adopter, not a behavior expert, b) without the aid of a helper dog, and c) without the aid of a familiar person in unfamiliar person Adoptability Guidelines.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are written in such a way as to assume that if a dog displays a problem behavior, the dog displays only one problem behavior. Consider the overall picture of the animal. If a dog displays multiple problem behaviors, even if each individual problem is considered “acceptable” on its own, the overall picture may make the dog unsuitable for adoption. When a dog exhibits a combination of acceptable fear, arousal, or aggression in a single context (e.g., fear and arousal in Leash Walking) or acceptable problem behaviors in multiple contexts (e.g., acceptable arousal in Leash Walking and in Handling), behavior staff must apply their expertise to decide whether adoption is the most appropriate outcome for the dog.

# How to Use the Adoptability Guidelines

* These Adoptability Guidelines are intended for use with dogs 8 weeks and older.
* After gathering all the available behavior information, you have for a dog (e.g., previous history, behavior in the shelter, behavior during medical examination, and behavior evaluation), determine if they meet the Adoptability Guidelines. Again, consider the overall behavioral picture: how does the dog *typically* behave? In other words, single, standalone instances of unacceptable fear, arousal, or aggression in unusual circumstances should not necessarily be weighed heavily, unless the behavior was truly egregious. If staff are unsure what is typical for a particular dog, then more information needs to be gathered. For dogs who have bitten, good judgment should be used to infer whether biting would be a typical response if the dog were to be handled and managed by a typical adopter.
* Use the Adoptability Guidelines and the *Treatment Eligibility Chart* to sort dogs into pathway planning categories as they make their way through the shelter system:

1. Further information gathering is needed
2. Meets Adoptability Guidelines and is eligible for placement
3. Doesn’t meet Adoptability Guidelines but is eligible for behavioral treatment
4. Doesn’t meet Adoptability Guidelines and humane euthanasia is the appropriate outcome

* Use the Adoptability Guidelines to track a dog’s progress in treatment. If a dog does not meet the Adoptability Guidelines but the *Treatment Eligibility Chart* indicates the problem behavior is eligible for behavior treatment, the Adoptability Guidelines can serve as behavior modification goals. Set progress benchmarks with the Adoptability Guidelines in mind.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are supported by other behavior pathway resources:
  + Adoptability Guidelines refer to fear and arousal in terms of severity (i.e., mild, moderate, and severe). See our standardized *Fear and Arousal Scales* for comprehensive definitions.
  + Definitions of select behavior terms (e.g., familiar person, unfamiliar person) are in the *Glossary of Behavior Terms*.
  + If the dog’s behavior does not match with Adoptability Guidelines, see the *Treatment Eligibility Chart* to determine if the dog is eligible for treatment. If the problem behavior is aggression, use of the *Canine Risk Assessment* may be appropriate.
  + Use the Adoptability Guidelines alongside the *Holistic Quality of Life Assessment* that measures a dog’s well-being in their current circumstances and helps us decide whether a dog is likely to have a good quality of life in an adopter’s home.
* The Adoptability Guidelines are a piece of an integrated, collaborative decision-making process. A dog may meet behavioral Adoptability Guidelines and behavior staff may recommend placement, but because of a combination of behavior and medical problems, a unified panel of decision-makers may determine that euthanasia is the most appropriate outcome. Alternatively, a dog might not meet all Adoptability Guidelines, but because of other factors (e.g., the dog’s small size), the panel may agree to place the animal.

# Exceptions, Caveats, and Gray Areas

There *will* be exceptions. This is expected and okay. Here are some examples:

* A dog doesn’t meet the Kennel Presence Guideline but doesn’t have any other problem behaviors and there is reason to believe that their problem behavior is specific to the shelter environment. Such a dog might be prioritized for alternative housing or presentation to adopters, a foster “test drive,” placement from foster, or transfer to another organization with a more appropriate environment for that dog.
* If puppies under 16 weeks of age do not meet Adoptability Guidelines, interventions should be tried before making a final determination on their outcome unless their behavior is egregious.

There are some things the Adoptability Guidelines don’t cover. Here are some examples:

* *Behavior we can’t assess in a shelter*: Examples include destructive behavior, ability to be housetrained, and excessive barking.
* *Compatibility with other pets in the home*: Some great companions aren’t compatible with other animals or would not permit a good quality of life for resident pets (e.g., a young dog who persistently attempts to play with other animals and doesn’t respond to their signals or corrections).
* *Compatibility with dog parks*: Dogs might make excellent companions and can live safely with other pets, but they might not be appropriate for a dog park or play with unfamiliar dogs.

Dogs living in urban environments face challenges not experienced by dogs in most other environments and, to reflect that, we have additional requirements for dogs who are expected to be adopted into an urban environment.

Of course, the Adoptability Guidelines are not a crystal ball and cannot account for every possible behavior. Although they can help us make sound decisions that are consistent across the organization, we acknowledge that we can’t predict behavior perfectly. Instead, we ask behavior staff to do their best to assess behavior objectively and compassionately, making decisions with each animal’s quality of life, adopter's quality of life, and community safety in mind.

# Behavior Adoptability Guidelines

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors by Context**

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| **Kennel Presence**  *Dog can be placed on an adoption floor in a shelter with familiar & unfamiliar people approaching, walking by, or pausing at the front of the dog’s kennel for 10 seconds or more.* |

**Acceptable Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Moderate Fear:   * Moving to the back of the kennel * Alternating between coming forward and moving away |
| **Arousal** | Moderate Arousal:  o Continuously moving, repetitive jumping against the walls or the kennel door, excitement/frustration barking when a person approaches  *provided it does not occur for most of the time the dog is in the kennel or when exciting stimuli are not present* |
| **Aggression** | Barking or growling at people combined with behavior and body language indicating fear  *provided the behavior stops within 5 seconds when a person interacts from outside the kennel door, or when the kennel door is opened*  Barking at people combined with behavior and body language indicating confidence  *provided the dog shows friendly behavior toward people as soon as the kennel door is open* |

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| **Leashing**  *Familiar and unfamiliar people can apply and take off the dog’s leash in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar locations (kennel, outdoor and indoor areas). A person can physically control the dog by taking hold of the dog’s collar to apply and remove the leash. A dragline may be used to help leashing in a large indoor or outdoor play area.* |

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Mild and Moderate Fear:  *provided the dog can be leashed within 5 seconds,*  *tricks, stealthy movement, and body blocking to prevent escape are not needed, and*  *the fear becomes mild or better as soon as the dog leaves the leashing area* |
| **Arousal** | Mild Arousal:   * Jumping on, mounting people, grabbing clothes, and chewing on, biting, climbing, or tugging the leash * Mouthing with mild pressure that does not bruise or break skin, except for puppies under the age of 6 months—breaking skin due to their sharp teeth is acceptable   *provided a typical adopter can interrupt or manage the behavior* |
| **Aggression** | When an unfamiliar person applies or removes the leash, the dog may give a hard stare, show whale eye, become rigid, or freeze combined with behavior and body language indicating fear  *provided the behavior stops as soon as the dog leaves the leashing area*  When an unfamiliar person applies or removes the leash, the dog may head whip or bark combined with behavior and body language indicating fear  *provided the dog shows friendly behavior toward the person as soon as the dog leaves the leashing area* |

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| **Leash Walking**  *Dog can be walked on leash, by familiar and unfamiliar people in the following contexts:  past unfamiliar people, in an unfamiliar area, through thresholds, inside, and outside.* |
| **Urban Environments Specific:**   * Dog can get in and out of an elevator * Dog can go up and down stairs both indoors and outdoors * Dog can walk past and stand within 2 feet of unfamiliar people indoors and outdoors * Dog will eliminate outside while on leash * Dog can walk on leash in a park-like setting and in a neighborhood with moderate distractions, like occasional passing cars and foot traffic |

*Note: For leash walking behavior when near other dogs, see On-leash Behavior with Dogs.*

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Mild and Moderate Fear:  *provided it occurs less than a quarter of the time on a typical walk, is specific to certain infrequently encountered stimuli,* *and the dog recovers (becomes mildly fearful or better) within 1 minute* |
| **Arousal** | Mild Arousal:   * Pulling on leash combined with excitement/frustration barking at people or other stimuli * Jumping on, mounting, or grabbing the clothing of the person walking the dog and chewing on, biting, climbing, or tugging the leash * Mouthing with mild pressure that does not bruise or break skin, except for puppies under the age of 6 months—breaking skin due to their sharp teeth is acceptable   *provided the behavior occurs less than a quarter of the time on a typical walk, a typical adopter can keep control of the dog and interrupt the behavior or manage it with proper equipment (e.g., chain leash, head halter)* |
| **Aggression** | Barking and growling at people combined with behavior and body language indicating fear  *provided the dog stops barking and growling within 5 seconds, the dog does not repeatedly engage in the behavior after interruption (even if the person remains present) and the dog shows friendly behavior toward people when not walking on leash*  Redirected aggression when triggered by a stimulus  *provided it does not escalate to attempted bites or biting* |

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| **Handling**  *Dog accepts petting by familiar and unfamiliar people in non-sensitive areas (e.g., backside, neck, shoulders). Dog accepts touching by a familiar person in sensitive areas (e.g., paws, ears, muzzle), including petting, inspection, and regular grooming, such as wiping paws with a towel. A familiar person can restrain and physically move the dog, either by picking them up, pulling by the collar, or pushing the body.* |

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Mild Fear:  *provided tricks, stealth, or forced proximity (confining the dog to a small space) are not needed to touch the dog, and the dog does not need to be repositioned more than one time when a familiar person tries to pick up or restrain the dog* |
| **Arousal** | Mild Arousal:   * Jumping on and mounting people, grabbing clothes, and chewing on, biting, climbing, or tugging the leash * Mouthing with mild pressure that does not bruise or break skin, except for puppies under the age of 6 months—breaking skin due to their sharp teeth is acceptable   *provided a typical adopter can interrupt or manage the behavior*  Moderate Arousal when restrained:   * Persistent struggling, including rolling onto back and kicking legs, trying to get away, and/or whining |
| **Aggression** | Orienting to a familiar person’s hand, yelping, lightly mouthing, and/or becoming tense/rigid when a familiar person touches sensitive areas on their body |

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| **Social Behavior with People**  *Dog can interact with familiar and unfamiliar people (be in proximity to play with or take treats from them). Dog shows that he has developed a social relationship with at least one person  (i.e., consistently follows or chooses to be close and shows affiliative behavior [e.g., wags/greets, play bows, licks person’s face]).* |

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Mild Fear when interacting with a familiar person:   * Especially when in an unfamiliar environment   *provided the dog is neutral, at worst, most of the time*   * If a familiar person approaches within arm's length and reaches toward the dog, the dog may take a few steps away in response, showing mild fear   *provided the dog returns to the person immediately or is otherwise neutral and engaging with environmental stimuli*  Moderate Fear when interacting with an unfamiliar person:  *provided it only occurs some of the time and the dog shows mild fear, at worst, most of the time* |
| **Arousal** | Mild Arousal:   * Jumping on, mounting people, grabbing clothes, and chewing on, biting, climbing, or tugging the leash * Mouthing with mild pressure that does not bruise or break skin, except for puppies under the age of 6 months—breaking skin due to their sharp teeth is acceptable   *provided a typical adopter can interrupt or manage the behavior* |
| **Aggression** | Barking combined with behavior and body language indicating fear when startled by a person (i.e., when a person suddenly appears or abruptly moves)  *provided the dog stops barking within 5 seconds and the dog does not repeatedly engage in the behavior after interruption (even if the person still is present)* |

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| **On-Leash Behavior with Dogs**  *Dog can see another dog at a distance, indoors and outdoors, and can walk past another dog on the same side of the sidewalk while on leash. Dog can be within 3-4 feet of another dog safely for at least a few seconds. Dog does not have to show friendly body language (e.g., wagging tail, indirect approach, relaxed posture, ears relaxed or back, raised paw), playful body language (e.g., bouncy movements, wagging, play bowing, solicitous barking), or even interest (e.g., mutual sniffing/investigation) when seeing or greeting a dog. Dog can briefly encounter other dogs, either on leash or due to management failure (i.e., dog slips through an open door) without harming them.* |
| **Urban Environment Specific:**   * The dog can be within 2 feet of another dog safely in enclosed spaces for at least 1 minute. |

*Note: See the Treatment Eligibility Chart for treatment recommendations for dogs with off-leash,   
dog-directed behavior concerns.*

**Acceptable Problem Behaviors**

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| **Fear** | Mild Fear and Moderate Fear:  *provided the dog recovers (becomes mildly fearful or better) within 30 seconds after  the interaction has ended* |
| **Arousal** | Mild Arousal toward the person walking the dog or a companion dog when triggered by another dog:   * Jumping on and mounting people, grabbing clothes, and chewing on, biting, climbing, or tugging the leash * Mouthing with mild pressure that does not bruise or break skin, except for puppies under the age of 6 months—breaking skin due to their sharp teeth is acceptable   *provided it occurs less than a quarter of the time on a typical walk, a typical adopter can keep control of the dog and interrupt the behavior or manage it with proper equipment (e.g., chain leash, head halter)*  Moderate Arousal toward another dog:   * Jumping on another dog, mouthing, and mounting * Pulling on leash combined with excitement/frustration barking at another dog with assertive body language (e.g., ears up, tail up, stiff tail raised high and moving back and forth, hackles raised, muscles tensed, erect posture)   *provided it occurs less than a quarter of the time on a typical walk, a typical adopter can keep control of the dog and interrupt the behavior or manage it with proper equipment (e.g., chain leash, head halter)* |
| **Aggression** | Assertive body language (muscles tense, ears up, tail up, tail “flagging,” direct eye contact, erect posture, and/or weight shifted forward)  Barking and/or growling at another dog when walking outside on leash  *provided a typical adopter can interrupt the behavior and the dog does not repeatedly engage in the behavior after interruption (even if the other dog remains in sight)*  *or, if a typical adopter cannot interrupt the behavior, it only occurs when the other dog is in close proximity (e.g., when walking past another dog on the same side of the sidewalk), a typical adopter can maintain control of the dog, and the dog displays neutral or friendly behavior toward dogs when not walking on leash*  Freezing, barking, growling, showing teeth, or snapping at another dog   * When another dog attempts an unwanted greeting/interaction * As an appropriate correction when another dog jumps on, paws, mounts, or persistently solicits play   *provided these behaviors are inhibited, the dog does not pursue the other dog and a typical adopter can interrupt the behavior and lead the dog in another direction within 5 seconds*  Male dogs freezing, barking, growling, showing teeth, or biting other intact male dogs  *provided the dog is highly affiliative toward female dogs, neutral at worst toward neutered male dogs, the bites do not cause damage and a typical adopter can interrupt the behavior and lead the dog in another direction within 5 seconds*  All aggressive behavior toward another dog if the dog is responding to aggression initiated by another dog  *provided the dog does not continue to aggress after the other dog stops (lies down, tries to move or run away, rolls over, yelps, or shows fearful body language, etc.)*  Redirected aggression toward a person or companion dog when triggered by another dog  *provided it does not escalate to attempted bites or biting* |