

Behavioral Testing of Dogs Implicated in a Fatal Attack
on a Young Child

J. C. Wright, Ph.D.
Psychology Department
Mercer University
Macon, GA 31207

R. Lockwood, Ph.D.
The Humane Society of the United States
Washington, D.C.

Poster paper presented at the Animal Behavior Society meeting
Williamstown, MA, June 1987

BEHAVIORAL TESTING OF DOGS IMPLICATED IN A FATAL ATTACK ON A YOUNG
CHILD

J. C. Wright, Psych., Mercer Univ., Macon, GA and R. Lockwood,
H.S.U.S., Washington, DC

We evaluated the behavior of three pit bull dogs at an animal control facility. The animals were reportedly involved in a fatal attack on a 4 year old boy. The purpose of our evaluation was to attempt to determine 1. the degree of socialization of these animals to people and to each other 2. the extent of any preparedness to behave in an aggressive fashion in different motivational contexts, and 3. the ability of these animals to restrain aggressive behavior in the presence of people. We also evaluated three other dogs, two of them pit bulls, held at animal control for a similar period of time. Each dog's behavior was recorded individually on a series of tests, in separate cages, in an area isolated from other animals and disturbances. In addition, we observed the three pit bull dogs together, reacting to a life-size doll in their cage and to a single bowl of food. Each of the three dogs allegedly involved in the fatal incident showed moderate to high levels of reactivity and/or aggression (e.g. growling, barking, lunging, and biting across all circumstances. None of the three dogs used as controls showed aggression under any circumstances. The testing procedures may provide a method for helping with a legal identification of dogs as "vicious."

What We Did

We assessed the behavior of three pit bull dogs (Canis familiaris) (two reproductively intact adult females and one male) at an animal control facility. The dogs, kept as pets by a single owner, were reportedly involved in a fatal attack on a black, 4 year old boy. The purpose of our behavioral assessment was to attempt to determine 1. the degree of socialization of these dogs to unfamiliar people 2. the extent of any preparedness to behave in an aggressive manner in different contexts, and 3. the degree of aggressive restraint demonstrated in the presence of people. We also assessed the behavior of three other adult dogs, two of them pit bulls (one male held at animal control for a similar period of time.

How We Did It

Each dog's behavior was recorded individually on a series of 8 tests (or 7 tests for the comparison dogs in separate adjoining cages, in an area isolated from other animals and disturbances. In addition, we observed the three pit bull dogs together reacting to the introduction of a life-size doll, and to a single bowl of food.

The 7 individual tests were administered for the pit bull dogs, followed by the comparison dogs. The order in which the dogs in each group were tested was reversed for tests 5 and 6. The following procedures were performed:

Testing Procedures (see video tape)

1. Friendly Approach/Direct Stare

The investigator calmly approached the dog and squatted in front of the cage. He displayed submissive/playful postures and behaviors, and spoke to the dog in a friendly tone. The investigator then increased his muscle tone, oriented toward the dog, and maintained a direct stare.

2. Food

The same investigator calmly approached and squatted in front of the cage, as in test 1. A piece of beef jerky was offered to the dog; the investigator spoke to the dog in a friendly tone, offered a second piece of beef jerky, and maintained close proximity to the dog until the food was consumed.

3. Auditory Stimulus: Ultrasonic Tone Generator

A different investigator calmly approached and squatted in front of the cage. As the dog oriented toward him, the investigator activated a hand held dog repellent for a duration of 1-2 seconds. The tone was administered as a punisher from 2 to 5 times during this test session

4. Visual Stimulus: Umbrella Opening

investigator calmly approached the cage and operated a hand-held umbrella in the direction of the dog from 2 to 5 times during this test session.

5. Agitation

The investigator approached the cage grasping a closed umbrella; he crouched, raised his arm in front of his head, and rapidly backed away from the dog. The procedure was repeated from 2 to 4 times, interspersed with hitting the umbrella against the cage. This procedure was done after test 6, for the comparison dogs.

6. Fur Piece

investigator waved an artificial fur piece (about the size of a squirrel) across the front of the cage.

7. Ping Pong Ball

investigator playfully bounced a ping-pong ball off the front of the cage. This procedure was not done for the comparison dogs.

8. Introduction of a Dog Walking By

An investigator walked a dog (Doberman pinscher) along in front of cages:

9. Introduction of Target Doll

A life size black doll was moved in front of the cage for each comparison dog. The pit bull dogs #'s 1-3) were placed together in one cage. They were distracted by an investigator while the doll was lowered into the cage on a thin chain.

10. Bowl of Food

The three pit bulldogs, together in the same cage, were presented with a single bowl of food from beneath the cage door.

What We FoundIndividual Behavior (Tests 1-8)Dog #1 - Adul Brindle Female Pit Bul

During friendly approach the dog growled with no signs of submissive behavior. She did not respond to play solicitation and seemed confused by the ball - showing some inclination to play bow while growling at the same time. She took food with no sign of fear, but growled throughout. The growling intensified when an investigator stared at her. She responded to the high frequency tone by withdrawing to the rear of the cage without threat. The umbrella elicited lunging and aggressive approach which increased in intensity when the umbrella was opened rapidly. She lunged forward and attempted to bite the fur piece without prior investigation. During agitation she was at the fence, barking and growling throughout

Dog #2 - Adult Tan Female Pit Bull

This dog displayed no aggressive or submissive behavior during friendly approach and play solicitation. When the investigator added a direct stare, she responded with a low-intensity growl, high muscle tone and avoidance of eye contact. She took food without threat. She responded to the tone by becoming alert, barking and growling without backing away from the fence. The dog reacted to a slowly and rapidly opened umbrella by charging, barking and growling with feet on the fence. She attempted to bite the fur piece without any investigation, growling, barking, and leaping at the fence. During agitation she lunged at the investigator in front of the fence, growling with high muscle tone, but with the tail down.

Dog #3 - Tan Adult Male Pit Bull

This dog responded to slow, friendly approach with a combination of play bows, growling, stiff muscle tone, and biting at the fence. A

direct stare from the investigator elicited leaping, growling, biting at the fence and lunging at the investigator. The dog accepted food but growled and gave a threatening direct stare immediately afterwards. He responded to an ultrasonic dog repellent by approaching, growling, barking and biting at the fence. Slow and rapid opening of an umbrella elicited charging, leaping and biting at the fence. A fur piece presented to the dog resulted in charging, growling and biting with no prior investigation. Mild agitation elicited a combination of play bows, growling, lunging, leaping and biting at the fence with profuse salivation. A bouncing ball was ignored

Group Behavior (Tests 9 and 10)

Response to Doll

The dogs were distracted by one investigator while a life size, black doll was lowered into the cage on a thin chain. The male barked and growled at the investigators. The two females noticed the doll first and immediately began tugging at the clothing on the torso. About 3 seconds later the male turned, saw the doll and, with no investigation, immediately seized it by the neck and began shaking it vigorously. Within 12 seconds the doll was dismembered. The attack continued for several minutes.

Bowl of Food

The animals showed low intensity threats to each other, but no serious fighting. They appeared to be well socialized to one another, with the male clearly dominant. He was able to keep the other animals away from the food bowl with a stare and mild growling.

Comparison Dogs

None of the three dogs used as comparisons showed behavior different from what would be expected from a household pet and none showed aggression under any circumstances. All responded positively to

friendly approach, showed some inhibition but no aggression to the ultrasonic horn, showed mild startle responses but no aggression to the umbrella, investigated the fur piece without threat and responded to mild agitation with "concern" and no aggression. The fingers and torso of the doll were sniffed and investigated in the same way that a friendly dog might investigate an unfamiliar child.

What We Concluded

Each of the three dogs allegedly involved in the incident showed moderate to high levels of aggression across all contexts. The three dogs showed little or no investigation of stimuli, but responded to each testing situation with aggression oriented toward the objects or the investigator. The male pit bull (#3 in particular showed a complete lack of inhibition in his aggressiveness. None of the three comparison dogs, on the other hand, showed aggression in any of the test settings. The three pit bulls appeared to be poorly socialized to unfamiliar people and to be easily aroused to at least moderate levels of reactivity and aggression, but not as a result of confinement in the kennel facility.