



Research

Integration ability of urban free-ranging dogs into adoptive families' environment



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ABSTRACT

In developing countries such as Turkey, problems arising from the growing population of urban free-ranging dogs affect welfare of those dogs and the surrounding community. Urban free-ranging dogs are often not considered as the first choice by adopters because a pre-existing history of indoor life, belonging to a certain breed, and friendly temperament are significant criteria for adoption. Integration ability of these dogs into a family environment is unknown as no detailed studies have been conducted. The aim of this study was to characterize the behavioral characteristics of urban free-ranging dogs in their adoptive families' environment during postadoption period. The data were obtained from questionnaires completed by 75 volunteer owners of urban free-ranging dogs. Most respondents (74.7%) reported that their dogs showed timidity or fear when they first arrived in the home. Yet most owners (69.3%) reported that behaviors of their dogs have changed in a positive way through the postadoption period. The most common behavior problems reported for the dogs were indicated as hyperattachment to the owner (58.7%) and escaping (32.0%). Most owners reported that they did not have a trouble either in house training (72.0%) or in leash training (65.3%) their dogs. Findings of this research indicate that urban free-ranging dogs are adaptable and can adapt to their adoptive families' environment.

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Introduction

The domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) was likely the first domesticated species. Although there is still scientific debate over exactly when and where this domestication process began, it is now certain that the dog evolved from the wolf (*Canis lupus*), but through domestication and artificial selection, large-scale phenotypic and behavioral differences have occurred in the domestic dog (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Pang et al., 2009; Honeycutt, 2010). Today, the domestic dog is the most common and the most abundant canid in the world, with more than 400 breeds that have different morphological and personality traits (Wandeler et al., 1993; Svartberg and Forkman, 2002; Turcsan et al., 2011). Vanak and Gompper (2009) recently categorized free-ranging dogs as owned dogs, urban free-ranging dogs, rural free-ranging dogs, village dogs, wild dogs, and feral dogs. According to this categorization, the

group “urban free-ranging dogs” comprises mongrel dogs that are living in urban area by feeding on human-derived food. Because this definition covers the subjects of the present study, the term “urban free-ranging dogs” is used in this article.

Urban free-ranging dogs are found in most of the world but primarily in developing countries. Every year in Turkey, thousands of free-ranging dogs are brought to dog shelters. These dogs are mongrel dogs with stray origins and can be classified as urban free-ranging dogs. The main aim of rescue shelters is to supply temporary accommodation for dogs until they find a home. Shelters also actively search for adopters who can take good care of those dogs. Regardless, the shelters usually provide permanent housing for the dogs because adopters are uninterested in them. Reasons for lack of interest include concerns about breed, management, and sociality (Posage et al., 1998). Studies have reported that adopters are more likely to take dogs that are at the front of the cage and interact in a friendly manner (Wells and Hepper, 2000a). Urban free-ranging dogs are mostly shy and nervous when interacting with people. As a result, large numbers of these dogs remain for long periods in these shelters at great expense to the community. Furthermore, the welfare and health of the dogs are adversely affected as is the surrounding community (Marston and Bennett, 2003).

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Several studies have focused on the postadoption period of shelter dogs with respect to integration into a new home and behavioral problems encountered by new owners (Wells and Hepper, 2000b; Marston et al., 2004; Stephen and Ledger, 2007). The most common behavior problems reported for shelter dogs are fearfulness, escaping, sexual problems, excessive activity, and barking (Wells and Hepper, 2000b; Stephen and Ledger, 2007). It is also thought that dogs adopted from shelters or as strays are more likely to display behavior problems (Serpell and Jagoe, 1995). There have been no studies on the postadoption period for urban free-ranging dogs.

The aim of this study was to characterize behavioral characteristics of urban free-ranging dogs and their interactions with the adoptive families and to identify behavioral problems displayed in the adoptive environment during postadoption period.

Materials and methods

Subjects

Data for this study were collected via a 22-item online questionnaire. The questionnaire started with an opening question to identify and eliminate owners who have purebred and mix breed (mix of certain breeds) dogs. Accordingly, respondents were asked to choose one of the options regarding their dog breeds in the first question, and only owners of urban free-ranging dogs, that is, mongrel dogs with stray origin, were allowed to respond to the rest of the questionnaire. As a result, answers given by 75 of 143 people, who reported that they adopted urban free-ranging dogs, were evaluated for this study.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire included 2 different sections, demographic information and behavioral assessment. The demographic information section was designed to gather information regarding approximate age (approximate age of the dog when (s)he was adopted, approximate current age of the dog), sex (male or female), reproductive status (neutered or intact), and background of the dog (the place where the dog was acquired, i.e., street, shelter, veterinary clinics, etc).

In the second section of the questionnaire, multiple-choice questions related to behavioral characteristics and behavioral problems displayed by the dogs during the postadoption period were directed to the respondents. In this context, behavioral problems refer to undesirable behaviors that are displayed by dogs in daily interactions and the home environment. Thus, behavioral problems were classified into 5 categories: (1) destructive behavior(s), chewing, destroying furniture, shoes, toilet paper rolls, and others, on being left alone, (2) excessive barking, (3) aggressiveness, (4) fearfulness, and (5) hyperattachment to the owner, following owner from room to room and/or demand of constant body contact with the owner. Moreover, owners were asked to answer multiple-choice questions related to their dogs' behaviors in home environment as follows: (1) Please describe your dog's initial behavior when (s)he was first introduced to the house (timid/fearful, self-confident, aggressive, playful, other: please describe), (2) Do you think your dog's behavioral characteristics have changed since (s)he first came home? (yes/no), (3) If you think that your dog's behavioral characteristics have changed, when did you first notice the change? (in the first 6 months/between the first 6 months and 1 year/after the first year), (3) If you think that the behavioral characteristics of your dog have changed, how do you describe the change? (became more self-confident at home/became more self-confident outside/became more timid/fearful at home/became

more timid/fearful outside/became more aggressive at home/became more aggressive outside/became more easygoing at home/became more easygoing outside/other: please describe).

Other factors such as areas of the house dogs have access to, reaction of dogs toward different stimuli, recovery time of dogs after a fearful stimulus, interaction of dogs with their owners, straying tendencies of dogs, and house—and leash—training problems were also evaluated in this section.

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 16.0, Inc. software (Chicago, IL) program. Frequency analysis was used to determine the distribution of variables. Because the data were not normally distributed, Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to compare currently existing behavioral problems among sex groups (entire males, entire females, neutered males, and neutered females), as well as among age groups (6 months–1 year old, 1–2 year old, and 2–8 year old). Chi-squared tests were conducted to assess whether background of dogs were associated with a certain behavioral problem in a timely manner. Significance levels were set *a priori* at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Demographic information

Seventy-five urban free-ranging dogs of both sexes and varying ages were evaluated as subjects in the present study. Details of answers given in the Introduction section are shown in Table 1.

Behavioral assessment

Owners were asked to describe behaviors of their dogs when they first came home. They could choose more than 1 option or write their own statement for answering this multiple-choice question. The vast majority of respondents ($n = 56$; 74.7%) reported that their dogs showed timidity/fear when they first came

Table 1
Number of dogs by age, sex, castration status, and background

Characteristics of dogs	n	Percent
Sex		
Entire males	14	18.7
Neutered males	18	24.0
Entire females	10	13.3
Neutered females	30	40.0
Unknown	3	4.0
Approximate age of acquisition		
0–3 month old	31	40.3
3–6 month old	16	20.8
6 months–1 year old	5	6.5
Older than 1 year	22	28.6
Unknown	3	4.0
Approximate current age		
6 months–1 year old	13	17.3
1–2 year old	13	17.3
2–8 year old	36	48.0
Older than 8 year	11	14.7
Unknown	2	2.7
Source of acquisition		
Shelter	18	24.0
Stray	40	53.3
Veterinary clinics	5	6.7
Other*	12	16.0

* The other sources of dog's acquisition are indicated as acquaintance ($n = 5$; 6.7%), pet shop ($n = 1$; 1.3%), faculty of veterinary medicine ($n = 1$; 1.3%), abundant house with many dogs ($n = 1$; 1.3%), puppy mill ($n = 1$; 1.3%), stray dog society ($n = 1$; 1.3%), family ($n = 1$; 1.3%), and an unfamiliar person ($n = 1$; 1.3%).

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