

The effects of relinquishment of rehomed dogs and shelter dogs

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Introduction

Dogs are one of the most popular pets, but unfortunately a large number of dogs are being relinquished to animal shelters every year. The rehoming procedure can be incredibly stressful to a dog, but the effects of relinquishment is not fully known. The aim of this study was to investigate how long term stress associated to relinquishment affects dogs both in short and long-term.

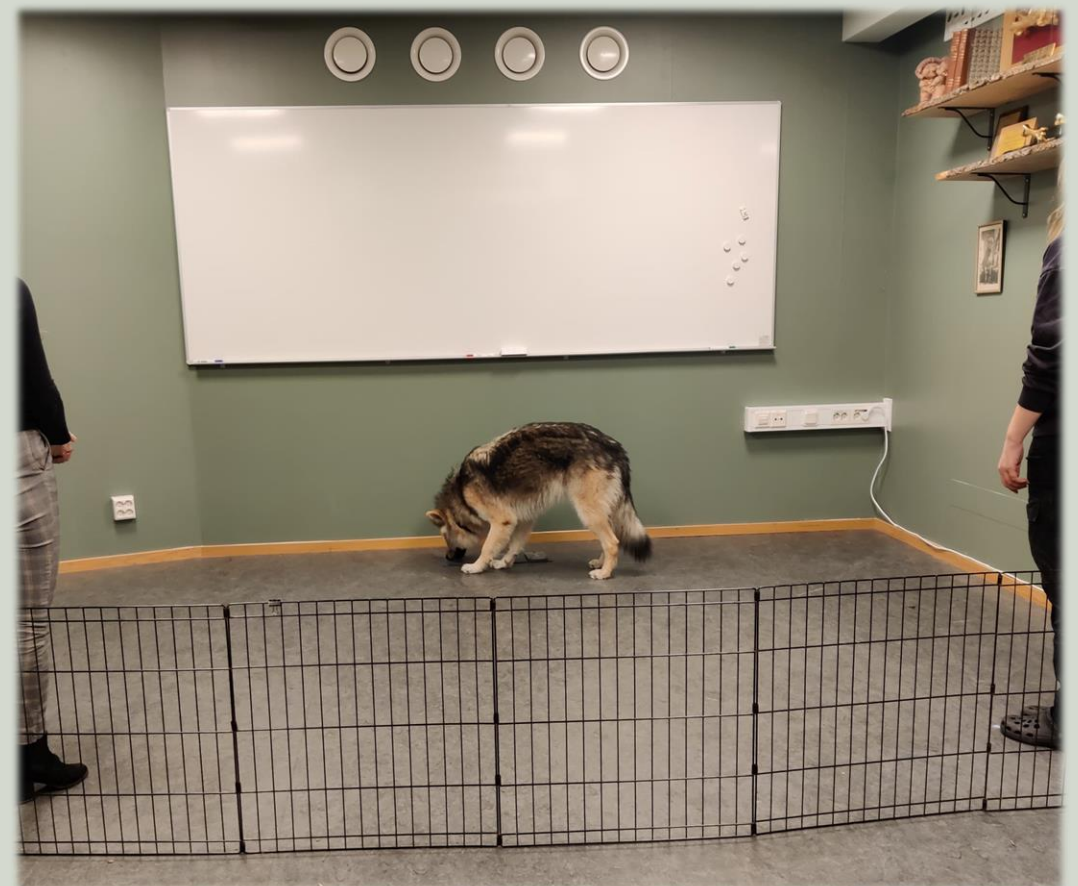


Figure 1. Unsolvable problem task

Methods

Rehomed dogs and shelter dogs were compared with a control group of dogs bought directly from breeders. They were tested behaviourally in an unsolvable problem task, memory test and eye contact test. In addition, sleep pattern was assessed with an activity collar and long term stress was assessed with hair cortisol analyses.



Figure 2. Memory test



Figure 3. Eye contact test

Results

Results from the unsolvable problem task revealed that control dogs were less in experimenter proximity compared to both rehomed dogs and shelter dogs. Shelter dogs vocalised less than rehomed dogs, and also spent less time having eye contact with the owner compared to control dogs. Shelter dogs also had shorter eye contact duration in the eye contact test. Additionally, rehomed dogs had lower cortisol levels compared to shelter dogs. No significant differences were found in the memory test or in sleep patterns.

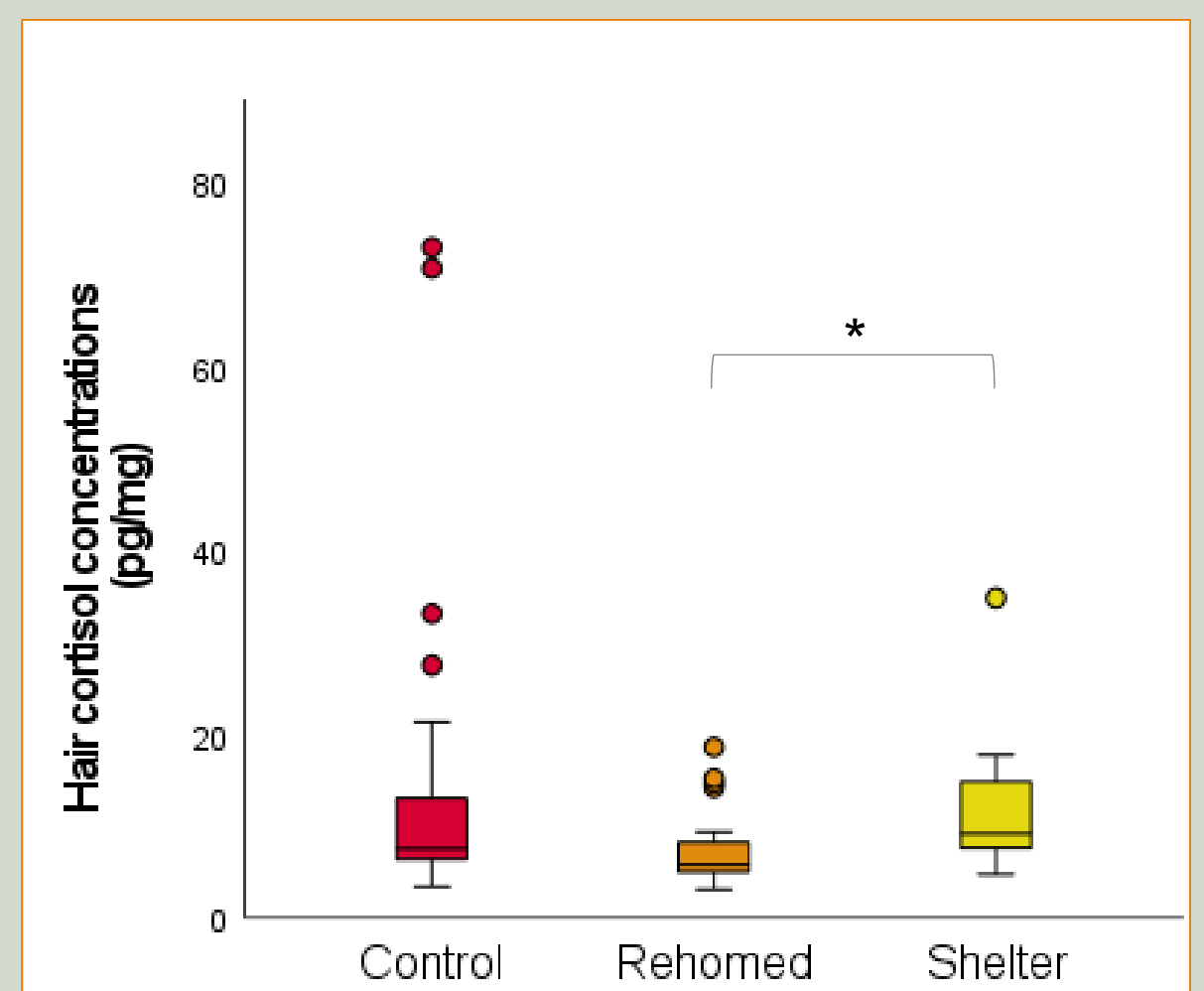


Figure 4. Results of the hair cortisol analysis. * $P < 0.05$.

Conclusions

This study found some indications of both short and long-term effects of relinquishment. Short term effects were seen in shelter dogs' reduced ability to maintain eye contact, and long-term effects were seen in rehomed dogs tendency to show more contact seeking-behaviour towards strangers.