

When Love isn't Enough: Behavioural Barriers to Keeping Pets and People Together in Underserved Communities

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Introduction

The RSPCA NSW Outreach team aims to keep people and pets together by providing core veterinary services at Healthy Pet Day events to underserved communities. Our programs use a community-centric approach to tackle issues leading to animals being relinquished or developing preventable diseases, issues that are strongly linked to human social determinants of health or socioeconomic disadvantage within a community.

Services offered include vaccinations, parasite prevention, pet food and the chance to access affordable follow up veterinary care for serious health concerns. Pet carers are also able to sign up for free or heavily subsidised desexing after the event. The aim of the day, and indeed the wider work of RSPCA NSW Outreach and Community team is to keep people and pets together and preserve the human animal bond. Healthy Pet Days do this by reducing parvo virus through vaccination, reducing unwanted litters and illnesses associated with undesexed animals, education on pet care and providing access to affordable vet care in the case of serious illness. However, aside from physical illness, behaviour problems are both a major cause of euthanasia and relinquishment into shelters or pounds. Behavioural euthanasia is the one of the leading causes of death for dogs under the age of three in Australia with 29.7% of deaths in this cohort being behavioural euthanasia (1). Within the RSPCA, 66.54% of shelter animals who were euthanised in 2023-2024 were for behavioural reasons (2).

For this reason, it was decided to try to increase the scope of services provided at a Healthy Pet Day and to attempt to assist behaviour concerns in the community, alongside the wide-reaching work already provided through RSPCA NSW Outreach.

Data collection

Between November 2024 and June 2025 RSPCA NSW held seven Healthy Pet Days across metro, regional and remote areas. This equated to 370 animals and 355 clients across the locations.



Image shows locations of RSPCA NSW Healthy Pet Days since pilot program began.

Healthy Pet Day locations are decided based on a variety of criteria including; a low SEIFA (socio economic index for areas) score, high intake into local shelters or pounds from that area, and an above high number per capita of complaints to RSPCA inspectorate (appendix 1.) Some events will also be hosted following a request from a local council or human service providers regarding concerns around companion animal health and husbandry in the local area. To access the services, pet carers must live in the area of focus and have a valid pension or healthcare card. RSPCA NSW partners with local human services to promote the event to their clients and community members, to target the events to those least likely to be accessing core preventative veterinary care for their animals.

Healthy Pet Days are scheduled with 10-minute appointments to maximise the time the clients have with the vet and limit the queuing time. At the time of booking an appointment we ask the caller if their pet has ever been to the vet before, and if they have, if they take their pet routinely or only when their pet is unwell. On the day of the event, after an animal carer has seen the veterinary surgeon, they are asked to participate in a post event survey. This assists the RSPCA NSW in measuring the success and impact of Healthy Pet Days, both in the short and long term. Survey questions include:

“How did you come to acquire your animal”

“What does your animal mean to you?”

The full survey has been included in the appendix.

From the locations RSPCA NSW Outreach have visited since the commencement of the pilot program, 48% of people surveyed had never taken their pet to the vet, and another 18% had only gone to the vet when their animal was unwell and had never accessed veterinary services for routine or preventative care. However, alongside this, the most common responses to the question “What does your animal mean to you?” were “everything”, “part of the family/ member of the family/ my family” and “my world”. It can be seen from survey answers that socio economic status is not indicative of the love that people have for their pets, or the strength of the human animal bond.

Analytical review

Returning to behaviour, the survey results also indicate that across the communities we visit on average 51% of animals are passively acquired, meaning the owner is likely to not have considered breeding, temperament, or any current physical health conditions that the animal may be suffering from at the point of acquisition, all of which can contribute to the development of behaviour problems (3).

Passive acquisition also means that animal may not be well suited for the carers current circumstances and this can contribute to the development of behaviour or training problems. Any physical health problems the pet has, or goes on to develop can often not be treated with the level of veterinary care they need. This is important for the purpose of this paper due to the link between pain and behaviour problems in dogs. One study found that at least 1/3 of animals referred to a behaviour veterinarian were found to have a painful condition, but that the figure may be closer to 80% (4). The RSPCA community and Outreach team are able to assist carers access veterinary care for serious welfare concerns noted on Healthy Pet Days, as well as giving advice on how to access veterinary care in a more affordable way, or how to assist in managing, for example, arthritic pain, through husbandry changes that are at low or no cost to owners. This may have the secondary benefit of improvement in behaviour concerns in some of the animals we assist.

The communities prioritised for a Healthy Pet Day are unlikely to be able to access in person dog training, either when they have puppies to help prevent future training or for assistance once a problem develops. A UK study found that when free dog training classes were offered to those in low socio-economic area only 57% of those signed up completed the course, compared to a 76% completion rate for a paid course in a higher socio-economic area (5). This implies barriers to access beyond money, such as transport, poor human health and lack of access to childcare. From our experience, we see similar barriers in the communities we serve in Australia.

Practice

As Veterinarian with Memberships in Veterinary Behaviour my anecdotal experience is that in lower socio-economic areas, myths around dog behaviour and training remain wider-spread and entrenched than in higher socio-economic areas. These myths include pack theory, alpha/ pack leader and the need for the dog's owner to be that pack leader, and the theory of dominance. There is a gap in the research literature to substantiate this theory. However, given the lack of access to up to date information in these communities such as financial and other barriers to veterinary care and force free dog trainers as well as lower literacy and below national average educational attainment, a higher persistence of these ideas does seem plausible. These ideas are harmful as they can lead to painful and aversive training methods being utilised, damage the human animal bond and will be less successful in solving a training or behaviour problem (6).

To assist with the above concerns, where staffing allows, a member of the RSPCA NSW Behaviour and rehabilitation team have also attended Healthy Pet Days since late 2023 to assist with training concerns. There has been no veterinary behaviour services post event until December 2024 where a pilot program, offering phone calls with a membershiped veterinary surgeon after the event for animals identified by consulting veterinary staff or staff from the Behaviour and Rehabilitation team as having a behaviour problem was started. A

behaviour problem is used to mean a mental health problem or illness effecting the animal, leading to behaviours that are abnormal in context, intensity or duration for that species and thus cannot be solved by training alone. A training problem is a behaviour that is normal to the dog but is undesirable to the pet guardian and can be resolved with training.

The phone calls are booked in with the animal carer at a specified time, and are free of charge. To date, eleven phone calls have been completed, of eighteen dogs identified at events as benefiting from the service and the owner expressing interest in the service. The remaining seven either could not be contacted post event or a phone call was arranged but they did not answer their phone at the arranged time, and then did not respond to calls and texts attempting to reschedule.

The aim of the phone calls is to provide practical advice, suggestions on behaviour modification and training and sign - post ways for the client to see a veterinary surgeon for medication if this is judged appropriate. In some cases, if the animal was seen by an RSPCA veterinary surgeon rather than a volunteer, we have been able to prescribe the medication ourselves.

This is a new program, and on a small scale so tracking impact is difficult. Tracking impact through, for example, measuring surrenders to pounds from a control area (an area with similar challenges) where the RSPCA is not conducting follow up calls vs the areas where we do have a presence is not possible with current resources. Indeed, long term tracking of the clients we do call is not possible with current staffing levels and resources. However, we hope that we can speak to some clients when they return to a Healthy Pet Day the following year to see if their concerns have been alleviated. The author has also found that people find the phone calls incredibly comforting outside of the practical advice. Explaining concepts such as that their pet is not trying to be “dominant”, that dogs who are showing undesirable behaviours are not stubborn, spiteful, or indeed beyond help can be hugely validating to people. It is likely that pet carers develop an increased empathy for their pets mental illness once they understand that this is what is happening, and this in turn will help to keep the human animal bond intact. We have seen one person who had a follow up phone call return to the RSPCA Veterinary Hospital in Yagoona for ongoing advice from a different membershiped veterinarian. Given the communities we serve, this is likely to have been a significant financial outlay for the client despite a pensioner discount, so demonstrates the importance the client is now placing on their pet's mental health.

Other strategies to assist with behaviour

RSPCA NSW Community and Outreach team did also try to run group dog training classes in one community with the author and an assistant from the Behaviour and rehabilitation team. Carers at the health pet day with a dog under six months old, who were interested in the service were contacted after the event. Six people were contacted, but only two attended the first session, one attended the second session and then nobody attended session three onwards. As noted earlier, there are multiple barriers to accessing training classes in community, and whilst we removed the financial and transport barrier (classes were held within walking distance of our target community) significant barriers still remain. This creates an ongoing concern regarding behaviour concerns among dogs in community as pre adolescent training has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of future behaviour problems (7). Community dog training classes have been run successfully in the USA but RSPCA NSW does not currently have the resources to try to establish classes run on a similar model here on an ongoing basis.

One potential future idea would be the development of a dog training app, which could be provided for free to community members. A force free dog training app was shown to reduce the development of behaviour problems compared to no formal training in a 2025 study (8). An app maybe more accessible and engaging than a formal online puppy preschool, as it was found that when free online classes were offered to people in a low socio economic community nobody completed the course (5).

Appendix 1- how the RSPCA decides on locations for Healthy Pet Days

	Population, Household income less than \$650 week (NSW 16.3%)
	Animal Care Facility (ACF)/ 1000 Estimated Residential Population (ERP)
	NSW Canine complaints (actioned jobs) /1,000 per head ERP
	Index of Socio Educational Advantage (ICSEA score) for the school(s) in the region
	Vet clinics available to service the community

Appendix 2-RSPCA NSW Healthy Pet Day Survey

RSPCA NSW Healthy Pet Day Survey 2025

Thank you for attending a RSPCA NSW Healthy Pet Day.
We appreciate your feedback from the event. There are no right or wrong answers and you do not have to participate if you do not want to. All your answers are anonymous. This will help us to provide you and your community with a better service in the future.

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

* Required

1. What location of Healthy Pet Day did you and your animal(s) attend? *

2. How satisfied are you with RSPCA's community support at today's event?
SCALE 1-5 *

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

3. What animal(s) did you bring to the Healthy Pet Day today? *

☐ Dog(s)

☐ Cat(s)

☐ Dog(s) & Cat(s)

4. Have you learnt something about caring for your pet today? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. What is the main food your pet eats? *

☐ Supermarket bought pet food

☐ They mostly eat human grade food/table scraps/leftovers

☐ Pet store/Vet clinic purchased food

6. How did you come to care for your pet? *

☐ Gift or rehomed from a friend/relative/neighbour

☐ Bought from a breeder or pet shop

☐ Adopted from a pound, shelter or rescue organisation

☐ Bought or rehomed through social media

☐ It was a stray

☐ Other

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