



Shelter Policy regarding Aggressive Dogs and Cats SPCA of Tompkins County

Definition and Policy

Aggression is a complex behavior that ranges from displaying a threat to overtly attacking a person or animal ([ASPCA](#)). All dogs and cats have the capacity to be aggressive and to bite. Aggressive behavior is malleable, influenced by socialization, genetics, training, husbandry, stress, and the shared environment. Aggression is used by dogs and cats to communicate and remove threats, and is motivated by fear, antagonism, predatory behavior, and arousal, serving to protect themselves, their resources, or their offspring. Some animals have predictable triggers for aggressive behavior while others do not. Dogs and cats bite with varying amounts of pressure, duration, damage, and inhibition. Not all bites are aggressive: dogs and cats may intentionally or accidentally bite during play or feeding.

Aggressive behaviors and their outcomes are difficult to predict. However, socialized animals who have shown overt aggression in the home, community, or shelter are more likely to repeat these behaviors. Those who have demonstrated significant aggression, such as a damaging bite, or for whom routine care is not possible without escalation to aggression, pose a substantial future risk to human and animal health. These behaviors also indicate significant mental-emotional distress and poor welfare of the pet.

Animal shelters have a duty to safeguard the public, adopters, and shelter personnel from bodily injury, and to promote animal welfare. It is therefore the policy of the Tompkins County SPCA that dogs and cats who demonstrate significant aggression prior to arrival or in our care, or those who present an unmanageable, credible threat of aggression preventing routine care, will not be offered for adoption. If a timely alternative outcome is not possible or appropriate, the Tompkins County SPCA will provide humane euthanasia for animals demonstrating these behaviors.

Identification, diagnosis, and communication about aggression and behavioral euthanasia decisions

The SPCA gathers information about current and past behavior from multiple sources to create a holistic picture of an animal's behavior in varying circumstances. An animal's history includes obtaining a behavior history for transported, surrendered and stray animals, interviewing previous owners, and reviewing veterinary records. Animal body language and behaviors are observed during daily handling, in their primary enclosure, and during medical examinations, with concerns reported to behavior and veterinary staff.

A comprehensive behavior assessment is performed by the SPCA's behavior team. Reports from volunteers and foster homes may be used to gather further behavioral information. Behavior and medical problems are diagnosed and pharmaceuticals prescribed by veterinarians to mitigate pain, anxiety and fear.



In dogs, aggressive behaviors include snarling, lunging, snapping, and biting.

Body language that may indicate imminent aggression in dogs includes growling, barking, lip curling, raising hackles, crouching, stiffening, and high tail carriage.



In cats, aggressive behaviors include chasing, swatting, scratching, grabbing, and biting.

Body language that may indicate imminent aggression in cats includes: freezing, stiffening, puffing of fur, crouching, hissing, and flattening ears.

When aggressive or concerning behaviors are noted, a risk assessment for the individual animal is conducted ([ASV Guidelines](#)). The level of concern is determined by gathering information from the sources listed above, and shared with shelter leadership, veterinarians, and managers at the weekly "Animal Welfare" meeting. For dogs and socialized cats who have bitten a person or another animal, the risk assessment includes:

- the history of aggression and documented bites
- the location and severity of the bite
- the situation surrounding the bite including actions and characteristics of the victim
- predictable triggers preceding the bite
- the ability to manage triggers in the shelter and in the community
- the age, sex, neuter status, and size of the animal
- the animal's response to behavior management in the shelter and previous home
- the animal's current welfare state

Once the risk is assessed, a plan is made to avoid triggers and continue to modify and monitor behavior while seeking adoption placement for mild and moderate cases. Behavior management may include environmental management, behavior modification, tailored pharmaceuticals, and/or foster. Updates are provided in subsequent meetings, rounds, and emails. Behavior counseling is offered to all adopters, and all aggressive incidents and bites are disclosed.

For cats demonstrating significant unmanageable fear or lack of socialization, or who have bitten a person due to severe fear or lack of socialization, the suitability of return to a previous outdoor environment is assessed. Return to field after sterilization and vaccination is the preferred outcome for these cats whenever possible. For cats with no previous experience living outdoors, a supported "Barn Home" outcome is urgently sought.

For dogs and social cats who have demonstrated significant, unmanageable aggression, a collective decision to proceed with humane euthanasia occurs during the weekly Animal Welfare meeting. Other stakeholders, such as staff and volunteers, are notified in person or by email as appropriate. In emergent cases in which staff or animal safety is compromised,

an assessment and subsequent euthanasia decision may be made collectively by shelter leadership and veterinarians in real time. In these cases, euthanasia will be performed as soon as it is safe and appropriate to do so. (Note: the SPCA only euthanizes animals they legally own or have permission in writing from the legal owner to euthanize.)

As part of our open admissions policy, the SPCA does not refuse to take animals based on behavior history. Animals with a history of behavioral challenges can be accepted for a managed admission when capacity is available to meet their needs. However, the only outcome available for dogs with a history of unmanageable aggression or severe, damaging bites at the SPCA is euthanasia. Owners seeking to surrender a dog with this history are advised of this policy. At the discretion of the owner, these animals may be admitted by appointment under the intake category “owner requested euthanasia,” and euthanasia will be promptly performed.

Euthanasia is a rare event at Tompkins County SPCA ([Annual Report](#)). Please see the “Statement on our “No Kill” Mission and Euthanasia” for more details about the euthanasia process at the Tompkins County SPCA ([SPCA Statement](#)).