

Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant

By Suzanne Hetts, PhD, CAAB, and Daniel Q. Estep, PhD, CAAB, [Animal Behavior Associates](#), Inc. Littleton, Colorado

Searching for someone to help you with your dog's training or behavior problem is something you should take seriously. You want your *children's* teacher to be well-educated and professionally trained, not just someone who loves children and likes to teach. If your child was having behavior or learning problems in school, you'd seek out a counselor or psychologist who was professionally educated and trained.

Seek out help for your dog from the same perspective. Don't rely on who is the most visible or does the best marketing in your community. Evaluate the credentials of the people you are considering. Your dog is going to be a part of your family likely for well more than 10 years, so investing in the best help available is worth it. Your dog's life may literally depend on it.

You should know that because there is no licensing for dog trainers or behavior consultants in the United States, anyone can use any professional title he or she chooses. Just because someone uses the title of "behaviorist" doesn't mean he or she has had any formal education in the science of animal behavior. Popular terms are behavior consultant, dog or cat behaviorist, dog trainer and behavior therapist (a term that in some states may be illegal because the "therapist" designation is a term protected through state licensing). Read on to see which terms are protected.

- Certified applied animal behaviorist is a protected term that refers *only* to those individuals certified by the Animal Behavior Society (ABS). Anyone using this term who is *not* ABS certified is doing so illegally, and this should be brought to the attention of the society. Learn about the ABS's criteria for certification at www.CertifiedAnimalBehaviorist.com or www.AnimalBehavior.org.
- Board-certified veterinary behaviorists are veterinarians who have received postgraduate training in behavior and have meet the criteria of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB). These individuals can also call themselves "behavior specialists." Other veterinarians *cannot* use the term "specialist" unless they are board certified. Unfortunately, non-veterinarians can use the term "behavior specialist" regardless of their education or experience. Learn more at www.veterinarybehaviorists.org. Veterinarians with a special interest in animal behavior may be members of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) (www.avsabonline.org)
- The only certification program for dog trainers that requires passage of an independently administered examination is the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (www.ccpdt.org).

Ask if the trainer or behavior consultant is certified and, if so, by whom. You should know the name of the certifying body, how long it's been in existence, what the criteria for certification are and whether the certification is independent of a specific training or educational program. "Certification" that comes as the result of someone graduating from a for-profit training program

is not what you're looking for because there is no independent evaluation of the person's credentials.

Ask trainers what type of training they have received, and from where, to become a professional trainer, how long they've been training professionally and what kind of experience they have. Ask behavior consultants how they acquired their knowledge about behavior and how they learned to be a behavior consultant. Look for academic training from accredited colleges or universities in animal learning and ethology, as well as supervised practical training.

Look for both trainers and behavior consultants who hold memberships in professional organizations and who pursue continuing education. This indicates individuals who are interested in keeping current on the latest advances in their fields.

Both dog trainers and behavior consultants are really educating and training *people*, so look for individuals with good communication and social skills, whom you feel comfortable talking to. Look for professionals who treat both people and dogs with respect and compassion. The [Animal Behavior Society](#), the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) and the [Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers](#) all have ethical statements and guidelines on their Web sites.

Choose trainers and behavior consultants who focus on encouraging and rewarding the right behavior with positive reinforcement, rather than relying on punishing or "correcting" undesirable behaviors. Both professionals should be willing to use whatever type of positive reinforcement works best for each pet, whether it is food, toys, petting or other enjoyable activities. Don't believe the "he should work for me not for food" myth, which is a misrepresentation of how treats and other reinforcement are used in training.

Look for trainers and behavior consultants who recognize the importance of people working with their own dogs under their direction, rather than sending the dog somewhere for a professional trainer to train.

Behavior consulting is different from general obedience training. Multiple or weekly visits by behavior consultants may not be necessary. Many problem behaviors won't be seen during a behavior consulting appointment (e.g., house-soiling), but behavior consultants should have other means to follow up with owners and help them implement the behavior modification plan.

Because of the extremely common myths and misconceptions surrounding the idea of "dominance" and the importance of being "alpha" over a dog, look for trainers and behavior consultants who do not focus on these ideas. Most behavior problems in dogs have nothing to do with dominance, and recommendations based on this idea often make problems much worse.

Avoid anyone who guarantees results. Pets are living creatures, and no one knows enough about their behavior to guarantee outcomes. Some trainers and behavior consultants may guarantee satisfaction with their professional services, which is a different thing.

Observe a training class. Are the dogs and people enjoying themselves? Talk to participants to see if they are comfortable with the training methods used. If a trainer won't let you sit in on a

class, don't enroll in the class. For confidentiality and safety reasons, it will be unlikely that a behavior consultant would allow a pet owner to sit in on a consultation with another client. Instead, ask the behavior consultant for references, such as from veterinarians or shelters that use their services, or from former clients who have given permission to share information.

If a trainer or behavior consultant tells you to do something to or with your dog that you don't feel comfortable with, don't do it! People should not be intimidated, bullied or shamed into doing something they believe is not in the best interest of their dogs. Dog owners should not allow anyone to work directly with the dog unless they first tell owners what they are going to do. Don't be afraid to tell any trainer or behavior consultant to stop if they are doing something to your dog that you feel is harmful.

Because behavior problems can have medical causes, look for behavior consultants who encourage you to first consult with a veterinarian. Be wary of trainers or behavior consultants who insist on diet changes or alternative homeopathic remedies without relying on input from veterinarians.

No matter how good the trainer or behavior consultant is, if owners don't follow through with practice, either in their everyday lives with their pets or with special practice sessions, they won't get the results they want.

Copyright 2005, 2008 All Rights Reserved. May be reproduced only in its entirety for educational purposes. Other uses require written permission from the authors.