



## Guidelines for Choosing a Dog Trainer or Behavior Consultant

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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 who you considering. Your dog is going to be a part of your family for likely well over 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 U.S., anyone can use any professional title they choose. Read on to see which terms are protected. Just because someone calls themselves a "behaviorist" doesn't mean they've had any formal education in the science of animal behavior. Popular terms are behavior consultant, dog or cat behaviorist, dog trainer, and even behavior therapist (a term which in some states may be illegal because the "therapist" designation is a term protected through state licensing). Whether people call themselves "trainers" or "behavior consultants" doesn't indicate whether they have different qualifications or not.
- ❑ **Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist** is a protected term that refers ONLY to those individuals certified by the Animal Behavior Society. 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 Animal Behavior Society's criteria for certification at the [Animal Behavior Society's website](#).
- ❑ **Board Certified Veterinary Behaviorists** are veterinarians who completed a residency in behavior and have meet the criteria of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Veterinary behaviorists may or may not have graduate degrees in a behavioral science. These individuals can also call themselves "behavior



specialists”. Other veterinarians can NOT 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](http://www.veterinarybehaviorists.org). Veterinarians with a special interest in animal behavior may be members of AVSAB ([www.avsabonline.org](http://www.avsabonline.org))

- ❑ All of the MANY certification program for dog trainers have their strengths and weaknesses. A certification has more credibility when the certifying entity is different from the entity that provides the education required for certification. In other words if XYZ Training School has an educational program whose graduates are XYZ Certified Trainers, then there is no independent evaluation of the criteria for certification OR of the people being certified.
- ❑ For that reason and others you should ask a number of questions about any certification the trainer has. You should know the name of the certifying body, how long they’ve been in existence, what the criteria for certification are, (including degrees from accredited institutions) whether independent written testing is required, if evaluation of “hands on” skills is required, and whether the certification is independent of a specific training or educational program. Look for ethical statements and guidelines on the website of any certifying body.
- ❑ Ask trainers what type of training they 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, who you feel comfortable talking to. Look for professionals who treat both people and dogs with respect and compassion. 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 ones. 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 “he should work for me not for food” myth which is a mis-representation 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. If you are considering a board and train, make sure their focus is on positive reinforcement methods as well.

- ❑ Behavior consulting is different from general or basic training classes to teach sit, down, stay, and similar behaviors. Many problem behaviors won't be observed during a behavior consulting appointment (e.g. house-soiling), but behavior consultants should 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. There is no need for "alpha rolls" and other physically forceful procedures.
- ❑ 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 not the same as guaranteeing outcomes.
- ❑ 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 class. For confidentiality and safety reasons, it will be unlikely 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 either 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 EXACTLY 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 that dog that you feel is harmful. Don't hand your dog's leash over to anyone if you are unsure what they are going to do.
- ❑ 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.