

Guidelines for Choosing a Dog Trainer or Behavior Consultant

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- Q 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 they've been in existence, what the criteria for certification are, and whether the certification is independent from a specific training or educational program.
- Q 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.
- Q 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.
- Q Don't be fooled! There is no licensing program for trainers or behaviorists. Anyone who mentions a license is referring to a business or franchise license.
- Q 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. The Animal Behavior Society, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the Association of Pet Dog Trainers all have ethical statements and guidelines on their websites.
- Q 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. 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.
- Q 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.
- Q 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.
- Q 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. The majority of behavior problems in dogs have nothing to do with "dominance", and recommendations based on this idea often make problems much worse.

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- Q 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.
- Q 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. If, for confidentiality reasons, you are unable to observe a consultation with a behavior consultant involving a pet owner, 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.
- Q 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 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.
- Q 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 or other nutritional changes without relying on input from veterinarians.
- Q 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.
- Q The Delta Society publishes a booklet entitled *Professional Standards for Dog Trainer: Humane, Effective Principles*, which provides guidance in identifying humane and effective dog training principles. It is available from their website www.DeltaSociety.org. Look for trainers and behavior consultants who follow these principles.