

Identifying a Qualified Dog Trainer or Behavior Professional

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The Reality of Animal Training Industry

Animal training is a booming industry. We love our pets, and we want the best for them. We also want to live with them harmoniously. Many pet owners seek out professional pet behavior help on their own as well, whether it is for puppy class or to manage an existing behavior problem. Trainers and behavior professionals are also sought out by veterinarians, shelter staff, and other animal care professionals to refer clients for training.

All it takes is a quick internet search, and you will be met with an overwhelming, never-ending list of animal trainers. It can be confusing to navigate this. There are several training programs, certifications, and credentials available for trainers and behaviorists. Be aware that 'behaviorist' is not necessarily a specific legal term: those with an MS or PhD in behavior are called 'behaviorists;' people without these or any credentials may be allowed to self-adopt the term 'behaviorist.' Additionally, while some credentials can be beneficial in many cases, they are not a guarantee that your trainer is using ethical, humane, or scientifically based methods. How can you narrow your search for a qualified trainer or behavior professional?



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The unfortunate reality is that anyone can call themselves a trainer because the training industry is not regulated. Additionally, just because a trainer has credentials does not mean that they are using methods that are ethical or supported by science. As with any other product or service, marketing plays a large role. Sponsored pages on Google and Facebook will show up first on the list because they pay to be there. Just because they pay to be seen first does not mean they should be your first choice. Being skilled at marketing does not make them a skilled trainer. Finding a qualified trainer or behavior professional is not an easy or simple task. It takes time, knowledge, and persistence.

Qualified trainers or behavior professionals are not often the ones that show up on the top of a Google search. They are not usually the ones on a TV show, nor the ones bringing lunch and flyers to your veterinarian's office. It is important to learn how to navigate this dilemma, as the methods used by trainers and behavior professionals can have a profound impact on your pet's welfare and the human-animal bond.

Why using a Qualified Trainer or Behavior Professional Matters

It is incredibly important for veterinarians and other pet professionals to know how to refer to qualified trainers and other behavior professionals.

Research has shown that reward-based training is more effective and more humane than aversive methods. Reward-based training focuses on teaching the animal what to do without using force instead of what NOT to do. Reward-based training works to increase the animal's motivation and improve their emotional state, which encourages them to learn and enjoy training. Research also shows that training styles that use force and aversive techniques increase fear and aggression in dogs, creating safety and welfare concerns that would otherwise not exist. Aversive methods may be effective when teaching a dog what NOT to do, but also can cause more severe behavior problems and negatively impact the human-animal bond.

What Makes a Trainer or Behavior Professional Qualified?

There are several training programs, certifications, and credentials available for trainers and behaviorists. While these credentials can be beneficial in many cases, they are not a guarantee that your trainer is using ethical, humane, or scientifically based methods. How can you narrow your search for a qualified trainer or behavior professional?

- Review their website and/or social media pages for a description of their training methods. Reward-based, positive reinforcement training is a good sign. Photographs or videos can be helpful as well. Look for animals being rewarded for doing the desired behavior.
- Ask about their education and experience. At a minimum, the trainer should have taken classes in animal behavior and psychology. Research any credentials your trainer has earned and understand what the requirements are to obtain the certification.
- Ask if there are any behavior problems they are not prepared to handle. A reputable trainer is self-aware and recognizes when a client needs to be referred elsewhere or work with a veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist.
- Ask to observe a class or a training session. Observe how the animals respond to the trainer and the communication skills that the trainer has with people.
- Ask yourself if you feel comfortable with the techniques being suggested. You should, and so should your pet.

What Are Some Red Flags to Avoid in a Trainer?

- Guarantees that training will be successful. Guarantees are unrealistic and impossible. Behavior can never be guaranteed. Qualified trainers and behavior professionals are willing to admit and discuss this.
- Review the trainer's website and/or social media pages. Be cautious of websites that are vague in terms of what methods are used. Again, photographs and videos can be helpful if available. Avoid trainers that use aversive methods or that use physical force with the animals. It's important to note that trainers that use aversive methods

are not always upfront about it, which is why vague communication about their methods is a red flag.

- Ask to attend a class or training session. Observe how your pet responds to the trainer and ask yourself if you are comfortable with the techniques being used.
- Ask the trainer if they use or recommend prong collars, shock collars, or choke chains. These aversive tools should not be used. You may see these tools in the trainer's photographs or videos.
- Avoid those trainers that reference dominance theory or being "alpha" or "top dog." Dominance theory has been scientifically debunked.

Resources for More Information:

- Calder, C. D. (2018). Who should you turn to for help managing behavior problems in small animal practice?. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 253(7), 847-848.
- [How to Choose a Trainer](#), American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. Retrieved from AVSABonline.org, August 5, 2021.
- [Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in Behavior Modification of Animals](#). American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. Retrieved from AVSABonline.org, August 5, 2021.
- [Behavior & Training](#). San Francisco Animal Care & Control. Retrieved from sfanimalcare.org, August 5, 2021.
- [How to Help Your Clients Select a Good Trainer](#). American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Retrieved from dacvb.org, August 5, 2021.
- [The Dominance Controversy](#). CattleDog Publishing: The Legacy of Dr. Sophia Yin. Retrieved from drsophiayin.com, August 5, 2021.
- [Animal Trainers and Behaviorists: Licensing and Certification](#). CattleDog Publishing: The Legacy of Dr. Sophia Yin. Retrieved from drsophiayin.com, August 5, 2021.

Research Highlighting the Benefits of Reward-based Training vs. Aversive Methods

- Hiby EF, Rooney NJ, Bradshaw JW (2004) Dog training methods: their use, effectiveness and interaction with behaviour and welfare. Anim Welf 13; 63–69.

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