

helping your dog thrive

Working With
Trainers and
Behavior
Consultants

By Vivian Leven Shoemaker

Dog ownership has become more involved. We view dogs as members of our family. They live in our homes and maybe even sleep in our beds, and this makes us more interested in really understanding what makes them tick. As we develop closer relationships with our dogs, we also become more aware of their emotional health. We care not only about the sit, down, and stay, but also we want them to be happy and harmonious family members.

It used to be that behavior issues were considered “bad manners,” and when a trainer was hired to help, it was with the view that the dog was taking liberties and needed to be strong-armed with obedience drills to “get back in-line.” The focus was to make the behavior stop. Today we know that, just like with people, dogs don’t act out to torment us or to be mean. The environment around them conditions their behavior. Behavior is



not static; you can never “stop” a behavior, only replace it with another one. Dogs, just like us, are complex emotional beings. In order to thrive, their basic needs must be met: nutritious food; water, exercise, feeling safe in their immediate surroundings, frequent social contact, and the opportunity to engage in problem-solving activities that can provide mental stimulation as well as a sense of purpose and control over their immediate environment and life as a whole. If these needs are not met, dogs may feel stress and agony, which can result in coping behaviors. These behaviors can be detrimental for both the dog and those living with him, ranging from minor misbehaviors to challenging behavioral problems. Faced with these troubles, dog owners may need to hire a trainer or behavior consultant.

Finding a Dog Trainer

All new dog owners are well advised to take their dogs to training classes. Basic training helps form the foundation for a long-term relationship and for the dog to understand and meet the owner’s expectations at home. Developing a well-mannered dog requires repetition, consistency, and breaking the behavior down in smaller steps so the dog can achieve success.

In order to get the most effective training services available, hire a certified dog trainer. There is only one national independent dog training certification in this country: certified professional dog trainer (CPDT). This certification includes two levels: CPDT-KA (knowledge assessed) and CPDT-KSA (knowledge and skills assessed). The latter is one step more advanced, as the testing is only available to those trainers who already are CPDT-KA and requires, beyond the written exam, videotaped training sessions with a client and dog in order to rate the trainer’s practical skills. There are other advanced courses a dog trainer can take and some recommended programs—(see the side column for more details). Certification ensures the trainer has knowledge in learning theory, husbandry, instructional skills, ethology, and more. Whether you go to a certified trainer or not, always make sure to pick a dog trainer who is professional and supportive to you *and* kind to your dog—and you see results.

Finding a Behavior Consultant

When your dog has a behavioral problem, the stakes are higher when looking for professional assistance. The reality is that there are fewer behaviorists (with actual behavioral degrees) than trainers. In fact, dog trainers are often asked to assist owners with canine behavioral problems. In these cases, some type of certification demonstrating a higher skill level is key, as it indicates the person is keeping up with the education required to remain certified, and is interested in evolving in their profession. There are a number of certifications to help you make that judgment—(see the side column for more details). Also consider if the professional has worked with similar cases before. Severe aggression, compulsive disorders, and phobias are often cases for a certified behaviorist and require medical treatment as well.

A behavior consultant has to make a functional assessment, create a plan, and then analyze and revise the plan as needed based on feedback from the dog owner. The dog’s history must be examined, along with the living environment and the interaction with individuals sharing the dog’s life. If there is a specific problem behavior repeated, the analysis needs to examine what triggers that behavior and identify the resulting consequence (i.e., what motivations are driving the dog to respond in this manner). In addition, a combination of management strategies and controlled practice sessions to condition a new response in the presence of the triggering event are created. It is also helpful to engage the dog in lots



Photo By Ashley Jenkinson

UNDERSTANDING THE PROFESSION

A “certified” trainer can mean many things. Some are certified through a school; some are certified through an independent group not affiliated with any school or membership organization. The term “certification” is widely used incorrectly in the animal field, and most certifications are, in fact, certificate programs. That does not mean that certificate programs are bad (many of them are quite good), but the dog owner should be aware that the term means many different things in this field.

Certificate programs are educational programs designed to teach a certain set of skills or knowledge. Graduates of the program receive a certificate. Examples of certificate programs include the Karen Pryor Academy, Animal Behavior College, SF/SPCA Dog Trainer’s Academy, and more. The main focus of a certificate program is education, and the educational process begins and ends with the program (from enrollment through graduation).

A **certification** has a different focus: assessing skills and/or knowledge. Certifications are run by organizations that are independent of the actual educational process, and their sole goal is determining if you meet a set of criteria demonstrating the attainment of a level of skill/knowledge. A certification is designed to show that you have met a set of standard skills/knowledge in your profession.

In order to maintain a certification, further education from independent organizations is required, usually in the form of continuing education units (CEUs). Examples of certifications are the CPDT-KA, CPDT-KSA, CBCC-KA (Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers), and the CDABC (International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants).

Applied animal behaviorists are certified by the Animal Behavior Society (ABS), a professional organization dedicated to the study of animal behavior. In order to apply for ABS certification, the professional must possess a graduate-level education in ethology, learning theory, comparative psychology, psychology, biology, zoology, animal science, or experimental design. She must also have a minimum of three to five years of professional experience.

Veterinary behaviorists have completed a minimum of a two-year residency under the guidance of a board-certified veterinarian and are professionally certified as diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (DACVB). Veterinary behaviorists are knowledgeable in psychopharmacology and may incorporate pharmaceutical therapy into behavior modification protocols. DACVBs are a rare breed.

Source: Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT.com)



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of activities that encourage appropriate responses and problem-solving skills where the dog gains control over his environment.

What to Look For

First, some traits should raise red flags when evaluating a trainer or behavior consultant. Be wary of trainers or consultants who: 1) propose solutions to suppress a behavior rather than transform the emotional state fueling the behavior; 2) guarantee a quick fix; 3) reference dominance theory or "being alpha"; or 4) recommend punishment and intimidation techniques to deal with a problem. These approaches may produce short-term results, but they will not help long-term, as they don't get at the root cause of a problem.

When hiring a professional dog trainer or behavior consultant, refer to these key elements for guidance:

HUMANE: Does not use any methods that will deliberately hurt or intimidate the dog. Applies the principles of the Humane Hierarchy as defined by the Certification Council of Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT), as well as the position statements by American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) on punishment and dominance theory.

SCIENTIFIC: Emphasis on learning theory (classical and operant learning) and animal behavior. Knowledge of canine body language and the ability to use techniques based in behavioral science to keep a low stress level and provide the optimum opportunity for learning.

PROFESSIONAL: Realizes high standards are important. A national and independent certification system has been developed for trainers, and additional certifications are available specifically for dog training professionals dealing with behavioral work.

Under the guidance and care of a trainer or behavioral consultant, most dogs' actions and emotional issues can be improved if not corrected. Don't struggle too long trying to solve these problems yourself; hiring a professional can help steer the dog and your relationship back on a healthy course. **ND**

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