

Information, Please!

A GUIDE TO THE CANINE BEHAVIOR PROFESSIONS

Dodger is soiling, spinning, barking, biting. He's out of control. What's a caretaker to do? Call for help! But whom—"therapist," "counselor," "consultant," "pet psychologist" or "doggy shrink"? The titles alone boggle the mind. What service does each one provide? Basically, three types of professionals can offer help for canine behavior problems—dog trainers, applied animal behaviorists, and veterinary behaviorists.

Help, I Need Somebody...

A trainer learns his or her craft through apprenticing, assisting in group classes, volunteering at animal shelters, attending seminars, and working with as many dogs as possible. Although thousands of people call themselves trainers, this is an unlicensed profession in most states, so quality and methodology vary tremendously. The Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers offers an international testing and certification program for pet dog trainers. Those trainers who have the requisite number of hours of experience and have passed a lengthy written test on ethology, training and instruction methods, learning theory, and canine husbandry use the initials CPDT (Certified Pet Dog Trainer) after their names.

Canine training takes place in group classes, private lessons, or board-and-train sessions. All manner of canine etiquette and dog sports are taught in group classes. Private lessons are best for solving in-home problems or for obedience instruction when owners have erratic schedules. Board-and-train allows someone else to train the dog without owner supervision. For this to be effective, the caretakers must be brought up to speed on what the dog was taught and how.

Applied animal behaviorists have an advanced degree in animal behavior or a related field and may be certified by the Animal Behavior Society. They are fewer in number than trainers, with only several dozen certified behaviorists in North America at this time. They work with the client's veterinarian to rule out any physical causes for behavior problems, and treatment can include drug therapy. The field is well suited for solving severe fears and phobias, obsessive/compulsive disorders, and aggression.

Veterinary behaviorists are the newest members of the problem-solving triad. The specialty became available for board certification by the American Veterinary Medical Association's Behavior College in 1995. These professionals best comprehend the diagnostic tests needed to rule out physical sources for a problem behavior and then recommend appropriate behavior modification techniques, coupled with nutritional and drug therapies, if needed.

Help, Not Just Anybody...

Not all trainers or behaviorists are created equal. Some have more experience working with certain breeds or types of behavior. Some are more adept at working with the general public. It is up to the caretaker to find the person with whom he or she will work most comfortably and effectively. Referrals from a veterinarian or local shelter are a good place to start. Pet-loving neighbors, dog walkers, pet sitters, or pet supply store personnel also may provide referrals. Do the same names keep popping up? Either your community has few choices or the cream has risen to the top.

Call several of the pros with the best feedback and ask about their credentials, experience, methodology, availability, and price structure. Speak with them long enough to get a feel for their personality. Is this someone you want to spend several hours with, someone whose directions you will be eager to follow, someone whom you can trust with your pet's life? If not, continue your search. In the case of group classes, consider observing a class before signing up for a complete series.

Once the selection has been made, come to the session with an open mind and an open notebook. If you are given advice you know you are unable or unwilling to take, let the specialist know so that he or she may offer you another option if one is available. Be willing to commit to the recommended protocol for at least 30 days before throwing up your hands and declaring it a failure. It takes time to change problem behaviors, especially if a dog is mature or the problems are well established. In some cases, complete resolution may be impossible.

There is no magic wand or secret pill to instantly correct behavior issues. Time, hard work and the guidance of a professional are the keys to success.

For More Information

Association of Pet Dog Trainers
www.apdt.com
Click TRAINER SEARCH

Animal Behavior Society
www.animalbehavior.org
Click BEHAVIORIST DIRECTORY

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior
www.avma.org/avsab/
Email the secretary for referral

Jacque Lynn Schultz, CPDT
ASPCA Companion Animal Programs Adviser
National Shelter Outreach

