The Pet Owner Guide to Choosing the Right Trainer for Your Dog

Pet Professional Guild Educational Handout #7

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Unlike some professions, there is currently no single ethical standard and no centralized or government licensing board for dog trainers and behavior consultants. As a result, consumers face a confusing landscape of philosophies and marketing language. The following suggestions will help dog owners find a competent, ethical trainer and keep their pet(s) safe.

1. Ask for Details of Formal Education and Credentials
Your trainer should have an educational background in how animals learn and are motivated. College, community college or vocational classes in psychology, animal behavior and/or animal training are a good sign. Trainers who have been in business a long time may have completed an apprenticeship or been active in dog obedience competition, but the length of time someone has been a trainer is not a credential in itself, nor is a passionate interest in dogs.

Accreditation through the independent testing process offered by the Pet Professional Accreditation Board assures consumers that the trainer not only has met a high standard regarding his/her skills, but is also committed to a high ethical standard for the way in which pets are treated during the training process. Membership in the Pet Professional Guild means the trainer or behavior consultant must adhere to a strict code of conduct that ensures no shock, no pain, no choke, no fear, no physical force, no physical molding and no compulsion based methods are ever employed to train or care for a pet.

2. Ask for Continuing Education Involvement
A good trainer keeps up with industry best practices. The trainer should be able to tell you about continuing education seminars, workshops or coursework they have taken and which professional body provided those continuing education credits.

3. Ask for References or Ask to Audit a Class
Any trainer who will not provide references or allow you to view a class probably has something to hide. If you speak to another client and they tell you they were helped to be a better pack leader, the “alpha” dog, to show their “dominance” or words to that effect, keep looking. It may mean the trainer uses outdated strategies or aversive measures.

4. Ask: “What Exactly Will Happen to My Dog if He Gets It Right?
Getting it right should result in the dog being reinforced (i.e. rewarded) with something he is willing to work for, such as a food treat, toy, game or privilege. Be wary of trainers who discount the use of food or who want to minimize its use. Food is a powerful motivator and modern trainers know how to use it to great advantage.

For more information, see the Pet Professional Guild handout, *The Proper Use of Food in Dog Training* (click here).

5. Ask: "What Exactly Will Happen to My Dog if He Gets It Wrong?" Ask: What Side Effects the Proposed Method Has

A skilled force-free trainer might simply ignore it if the dog gets it wrong and repeat the trial to see if the dog can get it right. Alternatively, the trainer could change the criteria expected of the dog by inserting a slightly easier step to make it more likely for him to succeed on the next attempt. Setting a dog up for success is paramount in any force-free training or behavior modification protocol.

A force-free trainer does not use aversive equipment (as outlined on page 1) to train. Recent studies have shown a relationship between use of harsh training methods and aggressive and/or anxious behavior in dogs. Fear is a particularly concerning side effect as it is difficult to undo. Methods that use pain or startle should thus be avoided at all costs. If anything a trainer says makes you uncomfortable, get another opinion.

Dr. Karen Overall, one of the most highly qualified veterinary behaviorists in the United States is squarely against coercive training, as is Jean Donaldson, author of the Maxwell Award winning book, *The Culture Clash*. Both sit on the Pet Professional Guild's Special Council. This is what they have to say about the issue of aversive tools in training:

"Absolutely, without exception, I oppose, will not recommend, and generally spend large amounts of time telling people why I oppose the use of shock collars, prong collars, choke collars, and any other type of device that is rooted in an adversarial, confrontational interaction with the dog."
~Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVB, CAAB

"Until these devices are illegal, consumers must protect themselves and their dogs by looking beyond the marketing messages of those who profit from their sale and use. It is not necessary to use electric shock to change behavior. It is not necessary in humans, in zoo species, in marine mammals or in dogs."
~Jean Donaldson, author of "The Culture Clash"

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Pet dog owners should begin training and socializing their dog as soon as he/she joins the family. All training should be done in a positive manner using rewards based, scientifically sound training methods. Please consult the Pet Professional Guild's Directory to find a trainer in your area:
Pet Professional Guild Directory: www.petprofessionalguild.com/PetGuildMembers.

To learn more about force-free training and humane, up-to-date, scientifically sound behavior modification and training methods, see www.petprofessionalguild.com

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