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## Finding a dog trainer or dog behavior professional: Questions to Ask

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There are currently no licensing, education or experience requirements for someone to call themselves a dog behavior professional, so it is important for you to be a knowledgeable consumer when selecting an appropriate professional. Many individuals who use the title “behaviorist” or “dog psychologist” have no educational experience that merits this designation.

**Trainers** are typically individuals who understand basic learning theory and can teach a dog to understand a series of commands or cues ranging from simple ones such as “sit” and “down” to very complicated ones that are involved in agility training such as weaving through poles.

**Behaviorists**, animal behaviorists, or behavior consultants typically provide more comprehensive services. Professionals with this designation should have advanced education in animal behavior or psychology. They are able to analyze a behavior problem such as a dog that appears to be afraid of stairs, or a dog that barks and lunges at other dogs and provide a behavior modification plan. *Only veterinarians or veterinary behaviorists are able to prescribe medication which may alleviate behavior problems.*

You should seek out the services of a professional with the appropriate background, education and training to address your dog’s needs. Below are some questions that will help you evaluate this information for a specific professional. The position statement developed by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior on behavior professionals also has useful information for choosing an appropriate professional (<http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/>).

- 1. Years of experience with your dog’s issues.** This question will help you determine if the animal professional has specific experience with the behavior you want to address with your dog. This question will help weed out novices but an individual with many years of experience may also be using outdated methods so it is important to also ask about educational background and methods used.
- 2. Do you belong to any professional associations? Are you certified through any professional associations?** – This information will help you determine if you have contacted a professional who has made a commitment to the profession and is engaged and active with professional associations. The following are some of the most widely recognized professional organizations of individuals who work with animal behavior:
  - Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians ([www.avbt.org](http://www.avbt.org))
  - American College of Veterinary Behaviorists ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org))
  - Animal Behavior Society ([www.animalbehavior.org](http://www.animalbehavior.org))
  - Certification Council of Professional Dog Trainers ([www.cpdtd.com](http://www.cpdtd.com))
  - International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants ([www.iaabc.org](http://www.iaabc.org))
  - Karen Pryor Academy of Animal Training and Behavior ([www.karenpryoracademy.com](http://www.karenpryoracademy.com))

**Note:** A veterinarian certified by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists is the highest standard of certification in the field. Next would be a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist through the Animal Behavior Society. The Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians is a newly recognized specialty organization for veterinary technicians who have demonstrated superior knowledge in animal behavior. Only these three professionals are required to meet stringent education and experience requirements. You will need to ask what was required for certification from other organizations because each organization differs. For example, the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers provides certification that an individual has recommendations from a veterinarian, a client and a colleague and has passed a multiple choice test of several hundred questions that assesses the individual's knowledge of basic animal learning, husbandry and classroom training techniques.

3. **What is your educational background?** – This information will help you determine if the individual has college level education regarding animal behavior or psychology. There are many individuals without this level of education who do a fine job of training and can resolve some basic behavior problems; however, you need to ask if they have stayed current in the field by attending seminars, courses, or conferences. Only certification through the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists or the Animal Behavior Society requires college-level education specifically related to animal behavior.
4. **What methods do you use?** – *This is a crucial question.* Any animal behavior professional should be readily and easily able to explain a general set of methods that are used. If an individual is reluctant to explain his or her methods until they see the dog, keep looking. There are many individuals who now advocate that they are “positive” trainers or who use “balanced” methods however this is often loosely defined. An important criterion for determining an individual's methods is to ask what the professional would do if the dog did not comply with a request. If the professional indicates that this is a sign of a “stubborn” dog, a “dominant” dog or an “alpha” dog and it must be corrected, keep looking. There are many reasons a dog may not respond to a request and the first consideration of the professional should be to assess the varied reasons this might occur. You can also ask what type of training equipment is used. If the individual advocates the use of pinch, prong or electronic shock collars with dogs that have fear-related or aggressive behavior, keep looking. Avoid individuals who use phrases such as “your dog is trying to be dominant,” “you must show your dog who is the boss,” or “your dog must face his fears.” The use of this type of equipment and this perspective implies the individual does not clearly understand the psychology of dogs with fear or aggression issues and they are relying on misconceptions and stereotypes about dog behavior.
5. **Final Considerations** – If the individual insists on a method or technique that makes you uncomfortable or appears to be causing your dog distress, remember that you can seek alternatives. Be cautious if an individual offers to train your dog in your absence and then return the dog to you. Much of training a dog is about you learning appropriate techniques and methods. This does not occur if someone else trains your dog. Finally, remember that behavior is not static. There are many variables that will influence how quickly your dog responds to training, including the amount of time you have to devote to training, the age of your dog, the type of problem being addressed, your dog's genetic background, and your dog's prior experiences. Exercise caution if an individual indicates he or she can guarantee the elimination of a behavior problem. Even the most highly certified professionals in the field will not guarantee that they can resolve your dog's behavior problem because they understand the wide variables that can influence your dog's behavior and the outcome. What they can do is provide training using techniques that have been shown to be effective with dogs that have similar problems as your dog and thus, can reduce the likelihood your dog will continue to have the problem.