

How to Choose a Trainer

excerpt from the How to Choose a Trainer Handout from the American Veterinary Society for Animal Behavior

Choosing a dog trainer can be one of the most important decisions that you make in your dog's life. The techniques that a trainer uses can strongly affect how you interact with your dog for years to come. Therefore, it is very important to choose your trainer wisely. Here are some guidelines for choosing a dog trainer. Remember, training should be a fun experience for both you and your dog.

- **Rewards-based training.** AVSAB endorses training methods that allow animals to work for things (e.g., food, play, affection) that motivate them rather than techniques that focus on using fear or pain to punish them for undesirable behaviors. Look for a trainer who uses primarily or only reward-based training with treats, toys, and play. **Avoid any trainer who advocates methods of physical force** that can harm your pet such as hanging dogs by their collars or hitting them with their hands, feet, or leashes.
- **Good teacher.** A good instructor should explain what behavior they are training, why it is important, and then demonstrate it. In a class situation, they should provide ample time in class to practice and individually assist students. They should be able to **adapt their humane training methods to the individual dog**. Class sizes should be small to ensure individual attention, or assistants should be helping with the classes.
- **Continual education.** Look for a trainer who demonstrates continual self-education. **A conscientious trainer will keep up-to-date** with new training theories and methods, and may attend workshops and conferences.
- **Respectful.** A good trainer should be personable and respectful of both you and your dog. **Avoid trainers who recommend using physical force (e.g. alpha rolling, pushing a dog into position, hitting, choke chain or pinch collar correction) or methods/devices that have the potential for harm, as an acceptable way to train.** Additionally, avoid trainers who make you feel bad about the speed of progress that your dog is making.
- **Observe a class.** Always ask to observe a class before attending. You need to make sure that the teaching style of the instructor will work with how you learn. Also, watch the students and their dogs. Are they having fun or looking stressed? Are dogs' tails up and wagging or down and/or tucked? Are the people talking with their dogs in happy, upbeat voices or are they scolding or even yelling at them? Talk to the current students - **are they enjoying the class and feel that their dogs are learning?** If a trainer does not allow you to observe a class, ask yourself (and the trainer) why.

Dr. Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, DACVB, believes that everyone should understand that:

- "the use of shock is not treatment for pets with behavioral concerns;
- the use of shock is not a way forward;
- the use of shock does not bring dogs back from the brink of euthanasia; instead, it may send them there, and;
- such adversarial techniques have negative consequences that those promoting these techniques either dismiss or ignore."
- **Do you feel comfortable?** Ultimately, **you should feel comfortable doing whatever it is the trainer asks you to do to your dog**. If your trainer ever tells you to do something to your dog that you believe will cause you or your dog undue harm or distress, ask them to explain why they recommend that technique, what the potential drawbacks of the technique are and how these will be addressed should they occur. Alternately, you could ask for another option.
- **There are no guarantees.** Because of the variable and often unpredictable nature of behavior, **a conscientious trainer cannot and will not guarantee the results of training**. However, they should be willing to ensure satisfaction of their services.
- **Vaccinations.** A good instructor will take care to protect the dogs in a class situation. **They should have vaccine requirements for the dogs**, and should discourage owners from bringing sick dogs to class. Make sure that your veterinarian is comfortable with the trainer's vaccination requirements, especially if the trainer is running puppy classes.
- **Problem behaviors.** When dealing with problem behaviors, such as biting and fighting, destructiveness, etc. **a good trainer should feel comfortable collaborating with your veterinarian and should know when to seek help from other professionals**. Many behavioral changes are caused by underlying physical problems, and a proficient trainer may ask you to visit your veterinarian for medical testing. Your veterinarian may consider adding medication to your pet's behavior modification plan once your pet's situation has been completely assessed. **Unless a trainer is a veterinarian, he/she does not have the medical background to recommend specific medications or to assess the possible risks and benefits of using medications in individual animals.**

