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Your Smart Dog

Empowered Owner – Choosing the Right Trainer

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Too many people hire me to train their dog without ever asking me how I train or what training methods I use. I frequently hear training horror stories: “My dog’s trachea is permanently damaged,” “[my dog] was so scared she peed.” These comments aren’t referring to a scary accident, but rather a scary – and dangerous – trainer. Spend enough time in any profession and you’ll find that there are some really bad guys out there right alongside the good guys.

You’re responsible for your dog’s health and well being. Hiring a trainer shouldn’t be done by picking one out of the phone book or blindly accepting an advertising claim. **Your dog is dependent upon the choices you make – make an educated decision when hiring a trainer.** This month’s article will help you navigate the muddy waters of dog trainers and will help you choose the right trainer for you and your dog.

Important factors to consider when interviewing a trainer include education, experience, teaching skills, communication skills, and training methodology.

Education. The last twenty years has seen an explosive growth in educational opportunities for dog trainers. Traditionally, there wasn’t an organized educational path to learn the science of training – it was only through years of experience that dog trainers gained their education. The profession has evolved rapidly, however, and the opportunity for formal education in dog behavior is now readily available. **Ask trainers about their formal education** and then research that institution’s program. A quick search on the internet can give you a good idea about the depth and rigor of the education, as well as the training philosophy they are teaching.

Continuing education is equally as important as the trainer’s formal education. We expect our medical doctors to keep up on the latest science, and you

should expect your dog’s trainer to do the same. Animal behavior is a dynamic and research-oriented field. Research is ongoing and the field is rapidly changing and the best way to stay informed is by attending conferences and seminars. Dog training professions have ample opportunity to attend educational conferences and seminars across the country. **Ask your trainer how many hours of continuing education they receive each year and what conferences they attend.**

What to look for: formal education and at least 12 hours of continuing education each year.

Certification. The dog training profession is unregulated – anyone can call themselves a dog trainer without any knowledge of dogs. There isn’t a test that must be passed or any regulations that one must meet to become a trainer. Which means dog owners have to do their homework to flush out the good trainers from the bad.

Certification offers a measure owners can use when evaluating a trainer. However, because there aren’t any mandated regulations about training, there also aren’t any mandates about certification programs. There is only one independent certification body in the United States – the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers – CCPDT (www.ccpdt.org). The CCPDT is not affiliated with any school or method of dog training; they measure a trainer’s knowledge in five areas: animal husbandry, equipment, instruction skills, ethology, and learning theory. The written test has been validated and is psychometrically sound. (Fancy words for saying the test is fair and tests what it’s supposed to test.) The CCPDT also requires continuing education in order to re-certify, as well as a minimum of 300 hours of experience as a trainer.

There aren’t any other independent certification programs in the country. This means that other certification programs are testing only on their own program – they aren’t using an independently created



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and verified testing mechanism. For instance, a large box-store advertises their trainers are certified – this means only that those trainers went through that store’s program. Unless you do a thorough investigation, you don’t know the rigors of the certification program, nor do you know the curriculum. I checked into one of those programs and found that their certified trainers merely had to read through material in the binder within a two-week time frame to become certified. No training experience was needed.

I don’t want to imply that other certification programs aren’t valuable, but think it’s important that dog owners realize that all certifications are not created equally. It’s still important for you to educate yourself about trainers certifications and make sure they are rigorous and valid programs. See *Note* at the end of the article.

What to look for: a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT) - independent certification by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers

Teaching and communication skills.

Education and certification are necessary, but if your trainer can’t work with people, you won’t benefit from the training experience. Professional trainers understand different learning styles and adapt their teaching style to match the client’s learning style. **Ask trainers if you can observe a class or two before you commit.**

- Do they explain the task, skill or concept clearly?
- Do they demonstrate the task, skill or concept?
- Can they answer questions completely so the owner understands?
- Are they friendly and smiling?
- Do they have patience if a client has trouble?
- Are they flexible and friendly?
- Do they ask for feedback on how *they* are doing?
- Do they check to be sure clients understand the lesson or task?

Customer service should also be a high priority when interviewing a dog trainer. As in any professional business, you should expect phone calls and emails to be answered completely, promptly, and

in a friendly manner. Trainers should be eager and willing to answer all of your questions and provide you as much detail and information you need in order to make your decision.

What to look for: friendliness, welcomes you to observe classes and to ask questions, prompt and courteous service, willingness to help you and your dog.

Training methods. It’s important to note that dog trainers generally fall into two “camps” when it comes to training methods. The traditional method of dog training, sometimes described as balanced, compulsive, or motivational training, relies on punishment and corrections to teach a dog to behave. The types of corrections used in this style of training run the gamut from mild (verbal “no”) to severe (shock). Many trainers also use verbal praise to indicate when the dog is doing something right. Until the 1990’s this was the predominant training style. Many traditional trainers use words like dominance, corrections, alpha, leader of the pack, balance, etc.

The other method of dog training is often referred to as positive reinforcement, clicker training, or reward training. Trainers who use this method produce a reward for the dog when he does something good. This method relies on rewards (reinforcement) as the consequence for good behavior and rarely, if ever, uses correction or aversive punishment. This training style has been used in zoos and aquariums for decades, but gained popularity in the mainstream dog training community throughout the 1990s. It’s popularity, however, has led some traditional trainers to use positive reinforcement “buzzwords,” while not actually adhering to the science behind positive reinforcement training – which makes a dog owner’s job even harder when evaluating trainers. Many positive reinforcement style trainers use words like clicker training, reinforcement, rewards, behavior science, and operant conditioning.

The [American Humane Association](#) (AHA), Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT), and the [Association of Pet Dog Trainers](#) (APDT), stress the importance of **humane dog training methods** when training your dog. From the APDT:



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A skilled and professional dog trainer employs humane training methods which are not harmful to the dog and/or handler, and avoids the practices of hanging, beating, kicking, shocking, and all similar procedures or training devices that could cause the dog great pain, distress, or that have imminent potential for physical harm. You have the absolute right to stop any trainer or other animal care professional who, in your opinion, is causing your dog undue harm or distress.

The AHA's *Guide to Humane Dog Training* is a 57-page document that explains "what every dog owner (and dog trainer) should know about their dogs and the different kinds of training equipment available." The guide covers topics such as dog behavior, how your dog learns (the science of learning), training tools and equipment, as well as instructor skills and ethics involved in dog training. This guide expertly covers training methods and equipment and discusses when (and how) to decide if using aversives is a valid choice for you and your dog. In addition, the guide educates owners (and trainers) on the unacceptable uses of aversives.

What to look for: ask trainers about their specific methods and philosophy; ask what equipment is required (choke chains imply correction-style training methods); look at their website and read about their training philosophy.

You are ultimately responsible for interviewing and choosing a trainer for your dog. Do your homework, interview several trainers, and choose the one that trains humanely and meets all your requirements. A good trainer will use humane training methods to teach your dog. A good trainer will enhance the relationship you have with your dog. To learn more about certification and to find a certified pet dog trainer, check out www.ccpdt.org.

Note: In the interest of full-disclosure, I am a positive reinforcement trainer. I do not use aversives or corrections to teach dogs.

I am the Vice President of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT) and a Certified Pet Dog Trainer.

I am a Karen Pryor Certified Training Partner, meaning I'm a graduate of the [Karen Pryor Academy of Animal Training and Behavior](#), who certify clicker trainers. They are not independent and a trainer must attend their school to become a Certified Training Partner.

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