

## *How to Choose a Dog Trainer*

Having a dog is in many ways like having a child. Dogs depend on us for their basic physical, social, emotional and educational needs. They also depend on us to *teach* them things we want them to do (and not to do) around the house and out in public. Dogs and humans are different species, after all! Group classes or private lessons with a competent instructor can be a great help. Anyone can call himself or herself a “Dog Trainer.” It’s therefore up to you to do some careful homework when selecting someone to help you. Following are some things to consider.

**Instructor Qualifications** – A seasoned instructor will have worked with many different dog breeds and with lots of different owners as well (remember: this is *people* training as much as it is dog training!). Trainer certification is a definite plus, but standards vary greatly, so ask what was involved in obtaining it. High prices or media fame are no guarantee of competence. Check what professional affiliations and ongoing educational forums the instructor participates in. Good trainers continuously strive to update their knowledge and hone skills. A good place to begin one’s search is [www.APDT.com](http://www.APDT.com). Trainer certifications are listed and one can search by zip code.

**Methods** – Modern dog training has come a long way from the harsh, “dominance” and pain-based methods that were popularized after WWII. A competent instructor understands and employs humane training methods that focus on teaching and rewarding desired behavior before considering punishment. Beware of a trainer whose first choice is physical force or fear/intimidation-based tactics in training. Ask what type of equipment is suggested. Pinch/prong and electronic collars should be used with caution, if at all. Choke collars can cause tracheal and spinal damage, especially in unskilled hands (i.e., most people!). A flat buckle collar or harness should be all you need to start.

**Communication skills** – A competent instructor will communicate well with dogs AND people. The instructor will be courteous and compassionate, and the sessions should be fun for all involved.

**Safety** – Health and safety are critical, especially outside the home or in class settings. For classes, ask about group size (any more than 6 – 8 teams per instructor at the basic level is very difficult to manage), facility safety/cleanliness, and disease prevention measures, and make sure you and your vet are comfortable with them.

**Client focus** – A good instructor will seek to understand *your* needs and will design a program or suggest a class to best meet them. Beware of one-size fits all in-home programs, major initial sign-on requirements, and guarantees. Variability in dog breeding & temperament and owner experience & commitment make it impossible to guarantee outcomes. However, an instructor can and should do his/her very best to ensure client understanding and satisfaction throughout the training process.

Above all, make sure you are comfortable with the person whose help you enlist. NEVER do or allow others do to your dog anything that makes you uneasy at a gut level, regardless of how “expert” or knowledgeable the person may seem. Listen to your instincts and ask questions. If you’re not 100% comfortable with the answers, don’t do it!

Good training can have a huge impact on how you and your dog relate to and enjoy one another for the life of your pet. Please choose your professional help wisely.

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