

AVSAB Behavior Professionals Statement

If your pet has a behavior problem or if you want information about your pet's behavior, the first source of information should be your veterinarian. Only veterinarians can rule out medical problems, diagnose behavioral disorders, and prescribe medications. If the problem is complicated, he/she may feel your pet needs a higher level of expertise and refer you to a veterinary colleague who has a special interest in behavior problems or to one who is board-certified in animal behavior by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB) or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist.

In addition to board-certified veterinary behaviorists, veterinarians interested in behavior, and Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists, dog trainers can be a good resource to help owners with their dogs (see Behavior Professionals Description). However, there are no licensing or experience requirements to be a trainer, meaning that there is no oversight of trainers or assurances that a trainer is using appropriate methods with each individual animal. In addition, at this time, there is no experience or licensing requirement for someone to call him/herself a pet behavior counselor or dog behaviorist. Therefore, owners must be careful when choosing trainers for their pets. AVSAB recommends trainers that use humane training methods (see How to Choose a Dog Trainer).

Types of Behavior Professionals

If your pet has a behavior problem, or if you want information about your pet's behavior, the first source of information should be your veterinarian. Only veterinarians can rule out medical problems, diagnose behavioral disorders, and prescribe medications. If the problem is complicated, he/she may feel your pet needs a higher level of expertise and refer you to a veterinary colleague who has a special interest in behavior problems or to one who is board-certified in animal behavior by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB) or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist.

A board-certified veterinary behaviorist is a licensed veterinarian who has completed four years of undergraduate schooling, four years of veterinary school, and a residency consisting of years of post-graduate education in veterinary behavior. He/she has also conducted original research, published findings in academic journals, and passed a rigorous exam. The veterinary behaviorist can fully evaluate the pet, both medically and behaviorally, and is trained to recognize where an underlying medical condition may either cause or contribute to a behavior problem. Once a behavior problem is diagnosed, a behavior modification plan will be explained and/or demonstrated to the owner. In addition, the veterinary behaviorist can use their combined understanding of pet health and behavior to determine when and if a psychotropic drug may be a useful adjunct in the treatment of a pet's behavior problem. For assistance in locating a board-certified veterinary behaviorist near you go to www.dacvb.org.

There are many veterinarians in general practice who are not board-

certified specialists but have considerable interest and experience in the field of behavior. These individuals, though licensed veterinarians, may not have completed the training necessary to become specialists. Due to their high level of interest, they have often attended many extra hours of continuing education programs and may be very familiar with the latest research and knowledge in the field of behavior. Veterinarians with this level of interest and dedication to the field may be very well qualified, experienced, and committed to helping pet owners understand and correct behavior problems in their pets. To locate a veterinarian with this level of interest in diagnosing and treating pet behavior problems, go to the website of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) at www.avsabonline.org.

Another professional who is well trained to counsel pet owners about their pet's behavior problem is a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB). CAAB's have two to five years of formal post-graduate academic education in the field of applied animal behavior resulting in the attainment of a master's degree (MS/MA) or a doctoral degree (PhD). Similar to veterinary behaviorists, their education in the fields of psychology, ethology, and principles of learning qualifies them to evaluate a pet's behavior problem, determine why it is behaving inappropriately, and tailor a behavior modification program for the individual pet. Since they are not veterinarians, CAAB's should recommend that a pet has a thorough physical examination by its veterinarian before a consultation takes place, and they should work closely with the veterinarian in the follow-up care of the pet's behavior problem. The organization that certifies Applied Animal Behaviorists is the Animal Behavior Society (www.AnimalBehavior.org). You can locate the CAAB nearest you by going to their web site at www.CertifiedAnimalBehaviorist.com .

If none of the professionals described above are available to you, please see our position statement on non-professionals and "How to Choose a Trainer." For the safety and well-being of your pet, please choose carefully!

The information on dog trainers is below.

See your veterinarian first!

If your pet has a behavior problem or if you want information about your pet's behavior, the first source of information should be your veterinarian. If the problem is well-defined and does not pose a safety concern, your veterinarian may refer you to a trainer. If the problem is complicated, he/she may feel your pet needs a higher level of expertise and refer you to a veterinary colleague who has a special interest in behavior problems or to one who is board-certified in animal behavior by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB) or to a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB).

**** Pet owning consumers are advised to use caution when seeking someone to train or treat a pet's behavior problem. At present there are no licensing or experience requirements to be a trainer, meaning

that there is no oversight of trainers or assurances that a trainer is using appropriate methods with each individual animal. In addition, there are no experience or licensing requirements for someone to call him/herself a pet behavior counselor or dog behaviorist, and many commonly used training techniques can actually worsen a problem and can even cause harm to a pet. Voluntary certification groups exist for dog trainers. These certifications may or may not be meaningful. Pet owners should investigate what it takes to get certified. Requirements for formal education and practical experience are important. These certifications sometimes (but not always) require written examinations, proof of training experience, and/or attendance at continuing education classes to maintain the certification. Pet owners should verify that the person they are hiring to train or treat a pet's behavior problem has some level of education in animal behavior, ethology, psychology, and learning theory. ****

AVSAB recommends that trainers use humane training methods (see How to Choose a Dog Trainer below).

How to Choose a Trainer:

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.

1. Reward-based training. There are numerous ways to train dogs. In addition, each animal has his/her own learning style and preferred motivators. AVSAB endorses training methods which 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.

Research shows that dogs do not need to be physically punished to learn how to behave, and there are significant risks associated with using punishment (such as inhibiting learning, increasing fear, and/or stimulating aggressive events). Therefore, trainers who routinely use choke collars, pinch collars, shock collars, and other methods of physical punishment as a primary training method should be avoided. Because of its risks, punishment should only be used by a trainer who can fully explain the possible adverse effects (SEE PUNISHMENT STATEMENT) and instruct owners in one-on-one sessions how to perform the techniques correctly.

Punishment should not be used as a general first-line approach; instead, trainers using punishment should discuss specifically which situations may call for its use. Punishment should only be used when animals know exactly what

humans expect of them are willfully disobeying. Animals are often misbehaving because people have accidentally reinforced the wrong behaviors or have not communicated clearly the appropriate behaviors. No learner wants to be in a situation where they have to constantly be afraid of making a mistake.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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. (LINK HERE TO PUNISHMENT STATEMENT)

5. 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.

6. Do you feel comfortable? Ultimately, you should feel comfortable doing whatever it is the trainer asks you to do with 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. Alternatively, you could ask for another option. (LINK HERE TO PUNISHMENT STATEMENT).

7. 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.

8. Vaccinations. A good instructor will take care to protect the dogs in a class situation. They should have vaccination requirements for the dogs, and should prohibit 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.

9. Problem behaviors. When dealing with problem behaviors, such as biting, fighting, and 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. In addition, many behavior problems are actually medical disorders that require diagnosis and treatment by a veterinarian. 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.