

South Shore Animal Hospital – NY

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Do I Need a Trainer or a Behaviorist?

Waving a magic wand won't produce a terrific dog. A well-behaved dog is a product of genetics, training, and a loving home. For the training part, pet owners often seek outside help. There are many people who work in this field so here is a simplified list of canine behavior professionals.

What is a Dog Trainer?

Dog trainers are known as behavior counselors or pet therapists and have varying levels knowledge and experience including formal and informal education. Many dog trainers are self-taught through reading while others attend professional classes. Still others learn by apprenticing with experienced trainers. Trainers don't hold a professional certification, but can still train dogs effectively. They teach dogs skill sets including obedience, agility, tracking, and search and rescue. They may work with individual dogs or group classes.



Dog trainers who attend specialized schools become certified by an independent organization after they meet specific requirements. Certified Professional Dog Trainers (CPDTs) are people who have earned their title by passing a standardized test administered by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. They demonstrate knowledge of canine husbandry, behavior, and teaching skills. CPDTs also work a required number of hours as a dog trainer and submit letters of recommendation before earning their certification. Dog trainers generally address behavior issues by trying to resolve the symptom (what is happening) rather than the underlying cause (why it is happening).

What are Applied Animal Behaviorists?

An applied animal behaviorist is a person with advanced college education (MS, MA, or PhD degree) and is an expert in dog, cat, and other domestic animal behavior. Some Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists (CAABs) are veterinarians who complete a residency in animal behavior after graduating from veterinary school so they have DVM behind their name as well. CAABs study animal behavior, biology, zoology, psychology, and learning theory, so they have lots of scientific, research, and medical knowledge. These highly educated individuals are an exclusive group that has a firm grasp on the normal behavior of animals which helps them recognize the abnormal.

CAABs are pet psychologists that teach the pet owner *why* the behavior is happening and make specific recommendations on *how* to change it. They are experts in behavior modification and know what techniques to employ to change undesirable behaviors. CAABs are also teachers that can effectively counsel pet owners and educate them on how to understand their pet's behavior prior to changing it.

Moreover, they can identify potential medical causes of abnormal behavior and know the medications that will enhance behavior modification. CAABs can prescribe drugs that address emotional issues such as separation anxiety, phobias, and compulsive behaviors, but do not treat physical problems like veterinarians do, so they work closely with veterinarians who refer cases to them.

What are Diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (Dip ACVBs)?

A veterinary school curriculum includes courses in animal behavior, but some graduate veterinarians pursue more extensive education in this field by completing a residency program focused on behavior. These veterinarians then pass a veterinary board exam to attain their diplomat status. Not all CAABs are veterinarians, but all Dip ACVBs are.

Veterinarians who are board certified in animal behavior are quite knowledgeable about the medical and physical causes of abnormal behaviors. They care for the total pet. If a pet's sudden change in behavior is related to a medical problem, such as a bladder infection that may cause house soiling or a thyroid imbalance that may prompt personality changes, the veterinarian can address these issues on both fronts. The Dip ACVB can prescribe therapy for the medical problem (antibiotic, thyroid supplement, etc.) and the emotional problem (anti-depressant, anti-anxiety medication) as well as suggest behavior modification techniques.

How do I choose the right animal behavior consultant?

There are many qualified people waiting to help you and your dog, so take time to choose the person who best suits your needs. If your dog has no behavioral issues and needs basic training in obedience or agility, call on a trainer. If your dog has behavior problems that need to be addressed, consider a CAAB or Dip ACVB. And remember that your veterinarian is there to provide advice and can refer you to another animal behavior consultant if needed.

Before hiring a trainer or consultant, look at their resume and speak to past clients. If you are going to enroll your dog in a group class, make a visit to observe the trainer in action before signing up.

“Young puppies and first time pet owners do well in group classes.”

Group classes are good for dogs that need to learn basic manners and skills. These classes teach dogs to sit, stay, come, lay down and walk on a leash. Young puppies and first time pet owners do well in this setting. Group classes may not provide a lot of one-on-one attention, but cost less and have the added benefit of socializing your dog with other canines.

Private sessions with a trainer or CAAB or Dip ACVB are better for addressing specific behavior problems like phobias, separation anxiety, excessive barking, destructive chewing and aggression. They cost more, but are better at tackling complicated issues.

Setting a Reasonable Level of Expectation

First, pet owners need to recognize that certain behaviors are simply natural for dogs even though they may be annoying. Some degree of barking, digging and chewing is normal. Even with training, you may not eliminate these behaviors and shouldn't completely change your dog's nature anyway.

Secondly, dog owners need to realize that the best pet professional in the world cannot work magic. There are no quick fixes to modifying behavior. Patience and persistence are required from both dog and owner. But people who love their dogs consider the cost of time and money is a small price to pay for a loving companion.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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