

How to Choose A Dog Trainer Like Your Dog's Life Depends On It

As pet guardians we've heard too many [horror stories](#) to take choosing a trainer lightly. Those who think all trainers are created equal are setting themselves up for disappointment. Our hope is to awaken other pet guardians, particularly first timers, to some of the red flags that show a trainer may be incompetent and compassionately challenged.

The pet training industry is rife with people willing to scare your dog into what they call obedience. Vets, behaviourists & qualified trainers have treated many dogs after punishing training methods have traumatized and physically injured them. What we know today may change tomorrow, but cruel is cruel. Dogs are still shocked, rolled, pinched, jabbed, choked, hung, kicked and poked in the name of training. World-renowned animal behaviourists are loudly denouncing such aversive 'training methods' as unnecessary, out-dated and cruel.

You know your dog better than anyone. You've spent the most time with him/her. A trainer evaluating your dog hasn't had that luxury. But what a qualified trainer does have is a clear understanding of learning theory, canine behaviour and body language. They will be observant, insightful and know the right questions to ask. These are necessary skills to have when evaluating a dog's unique personality and temperament. Otherwise, approaching a dog with a standard blueprint meant to achieve a fixed result may miss the mark.

Try not to be unduly influenced by fancy websites and franchises with clever names that market widely. For many franchises the ability to pay the fee is the only criteria needed to own one. Keep in mind the training industry is unregulated and anyone can call themselves a trainer. Claims that sound too good to be true, often are. Avoid trainers who advocate dominance theory and forceful tactics. These are trainers who talk about wolf packs and the need to be the leader, the 'alpha dog'. If a trainer insists your dog has a problem or is spoiled, and you don't think so, move on and find another trainer.

Dog trainers who refer to themselves as 'balanced' use this title to sidestep disclosure that they will use painful methods. The word balanced in most contexts has a positive vibe. When used to describe a trainer it obscures the reality that they will use punishing methods in addition to positive reinforcement. Trainers who use harsh techniques will give all kinds of justifications why these tactics are necessary. Their claims punishment is necessary to rehabilitate aggressive dogs is particularly ill-founded. Punishment suppresses behaviour it doesn't resolve it. [Aggression begets aggression](#), it doesn't 'cure' it. To build trust, patience and non threatening methods are required. It is highly recommended pet guardians consult with a certified animal behaviourist or veterinary behaviourist for seriously aggressive dogs.



Other red flags to watch for are promises and guarantees. Dogs are not things. As [sentient beings](#) every dog's personality is complex and unique so if you are promised a miracle or quick fix, be worried for your dog. Everyone's learning style is different. However, we all learn best when we are supported, feel safe, calm and are provided feedback and guidance in the form of praise and rewards. I don't know of anyone who would want to be taught with electric shocks, do you?

Scientifically proven reward based methods of training are endorsed by world-renowned professionals [experts and organizations](#), such as Karen Overall, Ilana Reisner, Karen Pryor, Jean Donaldson, the UK Kennel Club, SPCA's, Humane Societies, Veterinary Associations and many others. You can begin your search for reputable trainers [here](#). The wide disparity in the education, skill and experience means finding a competent trainer will take more than a quick Google search. Here are qualities you want to look:

Credentialed	Experienced	Sensitive
Competent	Calm	Effective communicator
Knowledgeable	Empathic	Respectful
Skilled	Intuitive	Compassion

Two attributes any trainer you hire should have are respect for the sentience of animals and humane training methods based on modern behavioural science. Proof of education is imperative but it doesn't measure the depth of a person's empathy so be sure to ask a prospective trainer about their personal philosophy, attitudes and affiliations as well as training methods. To ensure your pet is treated humanely we recommend you do not leave your pet to be trained without you.

Resources to help with your search:

- [Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers](#)
- [IAABC - International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants](#)
- [The Academy for Dog Trainers](#)
- [The Pet Professional Guild](#)
- [International Positive Dog Training Association](#)
- [Companion Animal Psychology](#)
- [The Kennel Club UK](#)
- [Positively Victoria Stilwell](#)