



# THE TRAINER'S Touch

~ Nicole Wilde

## How To Choose A Dog Trainer

**P**arents are particular when hiring a tutor for their children. They research the tutor's background, experience and more. Yet many dog owners don't ask any questions when hiring a dog trainer, other than the fee. Making a careful choice can have a huge impact on the way your dog is trained, which can in turn have long-term effects on your dog's emotional well-being and behavior.

There is no one governing body which certifies or licenses dog trainers. In other words, your Uncle Bob could hang out a shingle tomorrow and open Uncle Bob's Dog Training, Highfiving, isn't it? When you call a trainer, you might be speaking with one who is just starting out, or one who has been training for twenty years or more. To make matters more confusing, some trainers use a title before their name, or letters after it. Find out exactly what they mean. "Certified," for example, could mean he went through a three-week course to become certified through that particular school. "Nationally Recognized" could mean she has a grand-mother in Pittsburgh who recognizes her when she comes to visit! Besides, if one really was nationally recognized, would one have to put those words in front of one's name? Letters indicating a degree such as B.S., M.A. or Ph.D. are impressive, but be sure the degree is actually in a subject that has some bearing on dog behavior, such as psychology. An M.B.A. (Masters Business Administration) will certainly help the trainer, but it won't help your dog any. "Behaviorist" is a title accorded to those who have a Ph.D. in Applied Animal Behavior. While it is acceptable for a trainer who specializes in behavior issues to call herself or himself a Behavior Specialist, it is not ethical to call oneself a Behaviorist. Check out any claims of this nature.

Getting a recommendation from your veterinarian or a friend who has used that trainer is always the safest way to go. But even if you do, here are a few questions to ask.

1. "How long have you been training?" This one is a little tricky. Sure, you want someone who has at least a few years experience. But, a trainer with thirty years experience is not necessarily better than one with ten years experience, if the more experienced trainer hasn't changed their methods or improved to all that tune.

2. "What is your background and do you pursue ongoing education?" The best trainers regularly attend seminars and workshops to further improve their skills and learn the latest techniques. Avoid those who think they already know it all. Many trainers are members of the APDT, Association of Pet Dog Trainers. This organization promotes the ongoing education of its members. (The APDT web-site, [www.apdt.com](http://www.apdt.com), includes a city-by-city listing of trainers who are members, and has

recently started one of the only recognized certification programs in the country.)

3. "What sort of methods do you use?" Another tricky one. I haven't heard of a trainer yet who advertises "rough, punishment-based methods." It just doesn't sell. Although a trainer might call herself "positive," find out exactly what that means. For example, what would she do if a dog did not obey a command? If a trainer uses choke chains, by definition he is using "corrections." (While every style of training, there is a range of trainers, some much gentler or kinder than others.) The more clicker training or low-reward training properly, he is using "positive methods." Some trainers call themselves "balanced," which means they use both corrections and praise/reward.

4. "Do you train full time?" There are trainers who do other jobs while training on the side. That doesn't mean they're not good. For basic obedience, someone trains part-time might be fine. But for serious behavior issues, seek out a trainer who has been training full-time for at least a few years and has experience with the particular issue your dog needs help with.

5. For at-home training, can you do one session at a time, or are you required to pre-purchase a package of sessions?

6. Does the in-home trainer work only with the dog? Or will they train you to do so? The second option is desirable because after all, you're the one the dog will need to listen to in the long run.

7. For serious behavior issues, how much expertise does the trainer have? Some trainers specialize in specific behavior problems, while others won't handle issues such as aggression.

8. For a group class, will you be allowed to observe a class first? A good trainer will have no qualms about letting you observe a class.

9. How many dogs per class? In a large class you'll get less personal attention. Look for a small class, where the trainer demonstrates with students' dogs hands-on and gives feedback. Dogs and people should look like they're having fun, not being stressed out.

A professional trainer should welcome questions and have a pleasant attitude. If you feel a trainer is being rude or unfriendly, move on. There are others who will welcome your business and treat both you and your dog well. Happy training!

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