

Choosing A Dog Trainer as if Your Dog's Life Depends On It

As pet guardians we've heard too many [horror stories](#) to approach 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 indicate a trainer may be incompetent and compassionately challenged.

The pet training industry is rife with individuals willing to scare your dog into what they refer to as obedience. Veterinarians, behaviour specialists & certified trainers have treated many dogs after punishing training methods have traumatized and physically injured them. What we know today may change tomorrow, yet cruelty will always be cruelty. Dogs are still shocked, rolled, pinched, jabbed, choked, hung, kicked and poked in the name of training. World-renowned animal experts are loudly denouncing such aversive 'training methods' as unnecessary, outdated and cruel.

You know your dog better than anyone else. You've spent the most time with him/her. A trainer evaluating your dog hasn't had that luxury. Nevertheless, qualified trainers do have a solid understanding of learning theory, canine behaviour, and body language. They will be observant, insightful and know the right questions to ask. These are essential skills for evaluating a dog's unique personality and temperament. Otherwise, approaching a dog with a standard blueprint meant to achieve a fixed outcome 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 franchise fee is the only criterion needed to own one. It is the same for logos. Understand what they represent. Some logos can serve as a warning not to use that trainer. 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

Tools Permitted	YES NO		Methods Permitted	YES NO	
Shock			Rewards		
Prong			Punishment		
Choke			Praise/Games		
Halties			Dominance		
Harness			Spray bottles		
Clickers			Isolation		
Muzzles			Force / Pressure		
Crates			Science based R+		
Food / Toys			Withholding food & Water		

Always inquire if a trainer uses these tools and methods.

trainers who allude to wolf packs and the need to be the leader, the 'alpha dog'. If a trainer insists your dog has a problem because he is displaying breed specific behaviour, or is spoiled, and you disagree, move on and find another trainer.

Dog trainers who identify as 'balanced' use this title to avoid disclosing that they will use painful methods. The term balanced in most contexts has a positive connotation. When used to describe a trainer it obscures the reality that they will use punishing methods in addition to positive reinforcement. Shamelessly, trainers who employ harsh techniques will attempt all kinds of justifications why these tactics are necessary. Their claims punishment is necessary to rehabilitate aggressive dogs is particularly unfounded. Punishment suppresses behaviour; it doesn't resolve it. [Aggression begets aggression](#); it doesn't 'cure' it. To build trust, it is essential to use kindness, patience and non threatening methods. It is highly recommended pet guardians consult with a certified animal behaviourist or veterinary behaviourist for seriously aggressive dogs. The latter possesses both medical and behavioural knowledge, which can be important if an unwanted behaviour is caused from a physical issue.

Additional red flags to watch for are promises and guarantees. Dogs are not objects. As [sentient beings](#) every dog's personality is complex and unique so if you are promised a miracle or quick fix, be concerned for your dog. Everyone's learning style is different. However, we all learn best when we feel supported, feel safe, and receive 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](#). You can begin your search for reputable trainers [here](#). The wide disparity in education, skills, experience, methods, and ethics means finding a competent trainer will take more than a brief Google search. Two attributes any trainer you hire should possess are respect for the sentience of animals, an understanding of learning theory, and the application of humane positive reinforcement training methods. Proof of education is imperative, yet certificates and degrees don't measure a person's empathetic capacity, so be sure to ask a prospective trainer about their personal philosophy, affiliations, and take note of their attitude as well as their training methods. Psychopaths can earn degrees too. Always ask this question plainly: Do you ever use physical force, shock, prong or choke collars, head halters, muzzles, or straps around the groin for training? Always visit the trainer's facilities and observe them while conducting a training session. To ensure your pet is treated humanely we recommend you do not leave your pet to be trained without you.

Resources:

- [The Academy for Dog Trainers](#)
- [The Pet Professional Guild](#)
- [International Positive Dog Training Association](#)
- [Do No Harm Dog Training & Behavior Handbook](#)
- [The Kennel Club UK](#)
- [Positively Victoria Stilwell](#)