

How to make the right training decision for you and your dog

Analyze, ask questions! Your dog is worth the effort

by Christy Paxton

Trainer, Owner Hand in Paw: Real World Training for You and Your Dog

So you've brought your sweet ball of fur home and are starting the process of settling him into your home. As a responsible dog owner, you know that Rover should be properly trained so he stays as sweet as he is now and doesn't turn into the terror of the neighborhood. How do you go about finding the right training situation for your dog?

It's important to understand that there is a huge range of training choices out there. Group lessons or private? All-positive, "old school," or something in between? Every trainer has his/her own way of doing things, and many different philosophies abound. Here are some ways to wade through all the choices and find the best method for you and your pooch.

Determine your dog's needs, your goals

Some people just want their dog to behave; others have loftier goals such as competitive obedience, agility, conformation and so on. If your dog is basically good-natured and well-behaved, but you want him to get used to being around other dogs and learn a few commands, then just about any standard obedience class will probably suit you. If you are looking towards a specific competitive goal, however, then you should seek out those trainers with deep experience in your area of interest. Many clubs exist out there that can offer training recommendations for their club's activity.

If your dog has a specific behavioral issue, say is aggressive or extremely fearful, then you may need to consider a specialist, either a trainer with deep experience in that area or a certified behaviorist.

Group vs. private

Besides the dollar difference between private lessons and group lessons, other things to think about include your lifestyle -- can you clear your calendar for six to eight weeks so you can attend class, or do you need something that fits your schedule? Also, think about how you learn. What kind of student are you -- one that can take what is described or shown to you in class, then apply that at home, or one that needs to be shown and coached every step of the way? Dogs can learn in either place, but sometimes owners can't transfer the classroom experience to the home environment. So private lessons might be the best choice for those people.

Some people think their dog cannot learn in a group class because he is too hyper or too distracted. But think about it -- if he needs to be taught how to control himself, how else

to teach him but by exposing him to just such an environment? Your instructor should be able to help you work him through his problems and properly integrate him into a class.

If your dog is especially fearful or aggressive, private lessons are probably the best way to go. After some progress has been made, then perhaps try a group class.

Ask, ask, ask

Anytime you see a well-behaved dog, admire it -- then ask the owner where the dog was trained. Also, ask your vet, your groomer, your dog daycare provider, your pet sitter. They all usually have personal experience with some trainers or have names and places you can research.

Key questions to ask a trainer

Training philosophies today run the gamut from "old school" harsh (yes, there are trainers in this area who still believe it is okay to hit a dog) to all-positive/no correction. Even if you get referrals from your vet or other pet service provider, it's important for you to know what you are getting into. Be sure to ask of any trainer you are considering questions like:

- What is your general training philosophy?
- What methods of correction do you use?
- What can I expect to learn through your lessons?
- Do you offer behavior modification, or do you just teach the basic commands?
- Can you give me some referrals?

What's not necessarily important

Some consideration should be given to how long the trainer has been working with dogs, however, keep in mind that length of experience does not always equal quality. There are some trainers out there who have been working successfully for a long time to who I would not send my worst enemy!

Also, if someone tells you s/he is a "certified" trainer, ask for specifics. There is no national certification standard for trainers, though some national organizations do offer certification. And if someone tells you s/he is a member of this or that organization, that simply means that they have paid money to join, so again, it is not always as impressive as it sounds.

In the end, you are looking for that special person that will provide you the results that you want while being respectful of your precious pet. Take the time to find that person, and you will be rewarded with a wonderful experience that will give you a lifetime of a well-behaved, happy, loving dog.

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