



Finding the Perfect Match: How to Choose a Dog Trainer

A well-trained dog means a safer, happier life together! But with so many options out there, finding the right professional can feel a bit overwhelming.

Because dog training isn't professionally regulated in the United States, it's critical for pet owners to choose trainers carefully. Taking the time to find someone you truly trust with your dog is worth the effort for a positive, lifelong outcome. Here is a quick guide on what to look for to ensure your pup is in the best hands.

1. Look for Positive, Science-Based Methods

Modern behavioral science shows that animals learn best, retain behaviors longer, and remain emotionally stable when trained using **positive reinforcement**—such as food or play-based reward systems. Studies consistently demonstrate that if a dog associates fear or stress with their training, their learning efficiency drops, and the learned behavior often becomes a reactive defense mechanism to avoid a consequence. By contrast, reward-based training allows dogs and owners to thrive together without developing secondary reactive behaviors or anxiety down the road.

 **Red Flags to Avoid:** When searching for a trainer, pet parents will likely encounter individuals using the term **"balanced" training**. In modern animal behavior circles, this is recognized as a buzzword for mixing rewards with physical punishment. Behavioral science advises steering clear of techniques like **"leash pops," "alpha rolls,"** or methods modeled after television personalities. True science-based training rejects the outdated notion of dominating an animal or forcing them into submission.

2. Choose the Right Format for Your Life

Depending on your dog's unique personality and your specific goals, the ideal training setup will vary. While group classes can be helpful for general manners around distractions, we choose to specialize in the formats that offer the most direct, long-term impact for you and your dog:

- **Private Lessons (In-Person):** Certain behaviors or unique household dynamics necessitate one-on-one attention. Private lessons allow for a completely customized plan tailored to your dog's specific pacing, ensuring we address your exact goals in the environments where you need them most.
- **Online Training:** If in-person sessions aren't realistic for your schedule, lifestyle, or location, modern online training is a highly effective, steadily growing alternative. It allows us to work together flexibly, reduces environmental stress for reactive or fearful dogs, and focuses heavily on coaching you to become the primary handler.

Why I Don't Offer "Board-and-Train" Programs

While sending a dog away to a trainer can seem like a quick fix, it has distinct behavioral limitations. True, lasting success does not happen in a vacuum—it happens when *both* the dog and the dog's family learn how to communicate and work together. Because dogs struggle to generalize behaviors across different environments and handlers, a dog who behaves perfectly at a trainer's home or facility will often revert to old habits at home. By training *with* you, we build a stronger bond and ensure you have the skills to maintain your dog's success for life.



3. Check for Credible Credentials

A flashy website or flyer doesn't automatically mean someone is a reliable professional. Look for trainers who are passionate about their profession, have clear professional goals, and display a constant curiosity to learn and improve.

Trustworthy Certifications to Look For:

- **VSA-CDT:** Certified or licensed through the Victoria Stilwell Academy programs.
- **CPDT-KA / CPDT-KSA / CBCC-KA:** Credentials from the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers.
- **CTC:** An advanced, 2-year behavior and training program from Jean Donaldson's Academy for Dog Trainers.
- **KPA CTP:** Graduates of the Karen Pryor Academy 6-month Dog Trainer Professional program.
- **PMCT:** Pat Miller Certified Trainer course with Peaceable Paws.

Reputable Professional Organizations:

- **APDT:** Association of Professional Dog Trainers.
- **CCPDT:** Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers.
- **IAABC:** International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants.
- **PPG:** Pet Professional Guild (strictly dedicated to force-free training).

Ultimately, trust your instincts. If a training style or environment makes you uncomfortable, chances are your dog will feel it too! Always be your dog's best advocate.

Curious to Learn More?

If you want to dive deeper into the science of how dogs learn, reach out! I'd be happy to explain more about my methods!