

Getting More Help –

How To Find The Best Trainers For Your Dog & Save Time, Money & Heartache!

I've added the section on How To Spot, Interview and Choose The Right Trainers, Clubs and Behaviourists so you make sure you get the best and save yourself a ton of money, time and most importantly, to save your dog from suffering and yourself from a lot of heartache.

These comments are based on over 20 years practical experience in the field and I offer my observations to you in the hope that they will help you avoid making major mistakes when trying to get professional and qualified help for you and your dog you can really trust and that will benefit you both in the long term.

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Dog Training Schools, Groups And Classes

There are more dog training clubs now than ever before. Basically, there is a distinction between those dog training clubs run by volunteers, and those run by professionals.

This is usually easily spotted by the charges they make.

A volunteer staffed dog training club only has to worry about paying the hall rent, so it is possible for a training class to cost as little as 50p. A professional, who has to pay her mortgage, can charge as much as £7.50 for a group class per class member.

So, go for the 50p class, right? Not quite, I'm afraid. Taking time, effort and travelling into consideration, the £7.50 class might even be better value and much cheaper in the long run - if they can help you achieve what you wanted to achieve elegantly and speedily.

There are outstandingly excellent as well as appallingly abysmal dog training classes available from both professionals and volunteers - beware!

So how, apart from the basic price per lesson, can we tell what is the right class for your dog in your area?

Instructor's Qualifications

Something I feel you should always ask is "What kind of qualifications do the instructors hold?"

Now I would like you to really appreciate that **on its own**, any certificate, qualification or set of letters after someone's name, doesn't mean a thing.

Firstly, there are no universally recognised qualifications anyway (including the up and coming City & Guilds course, which won't be recognised by about two thirds of the dog training world, which happens to be split up into many warring and in-fighting factions).

Secondly, you can get two doctors, both with the same qualifications - and one is a true healer, a wonderful woman with a great concern for her clients, and the other a money grabbing, in-it-for-the-status and "I don't like people anyway" type of bitter and twisted person.

Same qualifications - but very different outcomes for the clients!

However, I feel that someone who has taken the trouble and expense to take whatever form of advanced training there is available in the field, has at least made an effort to be familiar with up-to-date thinking and has at least acknowledged that they don't know everything just yet.

Some people have been in the field “for 50 years” and they’re still doing exactly what they were doing 50 years ago. Great. I don’t think that’s what’s meant by “experience”!

“Letters”

Beware of letters after people’s names. There are organisations who distribute letters just for an annual membership fee and without any concern for the level or standard of their membership.

There are other organisations who won’t give out *their* letters unless the person has taken some gruelling training and many difficult tests.

Unless and until you have become knowledgeable in the wonderful ways of the dog training and behaviour world, don’t make too much out of impressive sounding letters, abbreviations and declarations on letterheads, advertisements and business cards.

Your Perfect Instructor

When you talk with a prospective instructor for you and your dog over the telephone, **take note of your own intuition.**

Does this person sound like someone you would be willing to take advice and instructions from? Do you like them? Do you think you could work with them? Do you feel they have an interest in you and your dog beyond collecting your class fee? Do they seem to understand your particular problem, your particular situation?

If the answer is “NO” to any of these questions, or you feel uneasy about them in any other way, keep looking for someone else.

It is pretty essential to the dog owner/instructor or trainer relationship **that the owner *does exactly* what the instructor advises.**

The methods may be very different from place to place, as there are as many ways to train a dog as there are ways to strangle a cat, but it’s vitally important for the success of the training that **the owner follows the methods the instructor outlines for them.**

If you don’t like and trust the person, chances are you won’t follow their methods, and if you don’t, the training is probably not going to work for you.

That does not necessarily mean “the instructor is no good” - it means that **it just wasn’t the right one for you.**

Visiting The Class

Do not enrol in any class unless you have visited it without your dog and watched proceedings in a class that will be of the same standard as the one you are going to join.

And just in case you missed this, let me repeat it.

Do NOT enrol in any class unless you have visited it **without** your dog and **watched proceedings in a class that will be of the same standard as the one you are going to join.**

The reason for this is that when you are with your dog, you will be self conscious and extremely distracted.

Your dog and what it does or does not do will become the centre of your attention - as it rightfully should be - but as a result you will not be in a good position to observe the class and club closely and critically.

What should you be looking for?

Firstly, don't look how well behaved the dogs are. Having been an instructor myself for many years, this can vary depending on how good they were to start with! Also, some classes seem to "gel" better than others which makes learning easier for everyone involved.

So, rather than looking at how good the dogs are, watch **how their behaviour is responded to by the instructor and/or any assistants he or she might have.**

- If they are noisy dogs, how are they quietened? If there are dogs that jump up, are over-excitable, aggressive, nervous, etc. how is this dealt with? What are the owners taught to do about it, and does it seem to work?
- **Could you do the things the owners are advised to do with their dogs, and would you want to?** Again, if the answer is no, find somewhere else. You'll be wasting valuable learning time for your dog as well as your money.
- Is the instructor in charge of the class? Are the people listening, **are the instructions clear? Do you understand** what is required, or are you left somewhat confused and bewildered?
- **Do the methods advised seem to work?** It doesn't matter if the methods **sound** good when the instructor explains them - it's the instructor's job to get **everyone** in the class, including the doddering old grandma with the hearing aid, to improve on their dog's performance **in practise.**

- **How much instruction/practise is each individual dog/owner team receiving?** In some classes, the instructors take one dog at a time - if there's 12 of them, no-one will get more than a few minutes attention, the rest is wasted waiting time.
- **Take a note of the class size.** Depending on the size of the venue, there should be no more than a maximum of 8 dogs for a single instructor without assistants.

If the instructor is outstanding, or the class advanced, he or she can take more, but with a beginner's class, where everyone needs a lot of help, you should not be looking at 12 or more dogs with only a single instructor. With two or three assistants who can dive in and give individual help as and when required, there can be more than 12 dogs in the class but even then it is not a good situation.

Also, more advanced classes of capable handlers with well socialised dogs and with an advanced instructor can have many more dogs in them, so do make sure you know **what standard of class you are watching.**

Lastly, let's go to your own intuition again.

Trust yourself and your overall feelings.

Did you like it there? Can't you wait to go back and get started? Do you want to buy a club T Shirt on the spot? If so, great. It's the place for you - your dog will do very well there.

On the other hand, if you're stepping outside into the fresh air and the first thing you do is breathe a big sigh of relief, or if you find yourself feeling unsure about what's being advised to other people's dogs, or if you're not quite sure - then give it a miss.

Keep looking.

It will be well worth travelling a little further or to pay a little extra to find a club or professional trainer that feels like coming home.

Puppy Classes

Kindergarten Puppy Training (KPT) has arrived in the UK with a vengeance. It's very popular and very beneficial if run properly - unfortunately, it's very popularity has led to people running these classes and groups who have little or no understanding of this specialist training field.

Once again, go and watch proceedings. Look at the puppies very closely and observe them for fear and stress, and observe whether this was actually caused by the way the group was run.

“Free socialisation”, where puppies get to play together off the lead, is one of the key elements of these groups. However, some have taken this to mean that you stuff 20 puppies into a hall, taking the leads off and letting them get on with it - with the result that like in an inner city school yard, there are puppies being overwhelmed by the noise and activity, puppies being bullied, puppies being frightened, puppies learning that they can bully others and get away with it, puppies learning that their owners are not as interesting as rampaging around with other dogs. Not something, I trust, you would want your puppy to learn!

Apart from this point, all others from the general dog training section very much apply to puppy training too.

Once again, I would say that it would be better not to go to class at all, rather than to go to one which could potentially damage your puppy or dog.

Private Lessons

Many dog professionals will give private lessons. They can range in cost from £10 to £50 or more, and with the very famous people you can pay over £100 for an hour.

I would put it to you that anyone charging less than £10 has either no self esteem, is a Buddhist monk, has themselves never spent very much on learning how to train others, or regards the whole thing as a bit of a hobby.

Many owners shy away from private lessons because of the cost involved.

However, it can be money very well spent. First of all, it's really quite cheap compared what you pay for your car mechanic or the plumber.

Secondly, you get a professional all to yourself, and you can learn a tremendous amount because the advice will be for you, and for you alone - remember, you have to drive to dog training classes for months on end, you'll be sharing the instructor with all the other people in the class; and if your particular problem isn't on the agenda, it will not be dealt with at all (especially if your problems are beyond basic obedience training or only occur in your home or out on walks).

If you have found an instructor, behaviourist or trainer you like and respect, and whose methods make sense to you, two or three private lessons spaced over a couple of months could well be the fastest and most economical way for you to get the advice you need.

Dog Behaviour Specialists

For the last 15 years, we've had a new breed of dog professionals - the doggy psychiatrists, dog behaviour counsellors, or behaviourists.

A good dog behaviour specialist will be able to help you with the most extreme of problems - because they will have met them many times before. They should have an understanding of a wide variety of approaches, both psychological and practical, to plan a long term strategy specially suited to you and your dog, to help you overcome your problems.

When choosing a dog behaviour specialist, **please be as circumspect as if you were choosing double glazing for your house, or a psychiatrist for yourself.**

Allow yourself to be **demanding of the highest standards** of rapport, understanding, knowledge and service - you will be paying a premium price for a premium service.

Do not let anyone try to blind you with long scientific words. Rather, ask them when they last dealt with a similar case and what kind of strategies they expect to be applying. Most likely, they'll say something like, "I need to see you in person, I'm not allowed to diagnose over the telephone." which is fair enough. But do make sure you can tie them down enough to find out if they are going to use things like shock collars, physical punishment, or psychological warfare designed "to put the dog in it's place".

Also, **be very circumspect of anyone claiming to be able to solve *any* problem.** No-one can, apart from Jesus Christ, perhaps. They should be realistic enough to tell you that they will certainly do their best to help you, but that there cannot be any guarantees.

Once more, listen to your intuition carefully.

If you feel they're only after your money, or that this isn't the kind of person you'd ever think to invite to a party, then do not hire them. There's enough behaviour specialists out there now for you to be able to shop around.

Recommendations and Referrals

Personal recommendations are great, with a little caution. When I first had a dog, I met a person in a park whose dog had run off to chase the swans. Once she stopped screaming after it's disappearing tail on the horizon and accepted the inevitable, she proceeded to recommend a good dog training class to me. I went home giggling all the way!

Make sure that those who recommend any dog training or behaviour services indeed got their problems solved - many dog trainers and behaviourists are very good at getting people to think it was somehow their own fault that they failed to get the results they expected.

Referrals, also, are a bit of a two edged sword. Quite a few behaviourists pay referral fees - so if a pet shop refers to them, they get 10% of the resulting fee as a reward.

Although referrals are good and better than having no referrals (obviously!), do not take them for gospel, even if it's your own vet that's doing the referring.

Do your own checking as well and make up your own mind.

Books, Magazines & Videos

With so much (often conflicting) information about, nowadays it is more important than ever before that **you know where you stand** before taking on any further information.

Although this is an oversimplification, you can roughly divide the information givers into the following, often mutually exclusive, camps.

There's those who see dogs as tools - like a police dog, or a sheep dog.

Dogs are there to do a job of work and are appreciated like a craftsman would appreciate a good tool - but if they don't, they will be disposed of without any qualms or reservations because they're no longer useful.

A lot (but not all) of competitive obedience people and a lot (but not all) of ex-police and RAF trainers look at dogs in this way.

There's those who see dogs from a scientific point of view - a favourite with many (but not all) doggy psychiatrists and behaviourists.

In this style of thinking, dogs are basically wolf descendent, stimulus/response driven organisms that are fed, reared and have their behaviour patterns adjusted by utilising scientific discoveries in order to maximise their efficient functioning in the society/pack structure context.

There's those who see dogs as companions - a view that is increasing but still rarer than the two above. In this view of dogs, they are feeling, intelligent creatures who form relationships just as humans do, and with very similar needs to their human guardians as regards their minds, their bodies, and their spirits.

Not any of these are any “better” than any other - let us be clear about this.

However, it is important for you to know which one is closest to your own understanding of your relationship with your dog, for if a person who sees their dog as their best buddy goes to an instructor or reads a book by someone who views a problem dog akin to a broken Land Rover, they will have such a clash of world views that they will not be able to understand what the instructor is trying to achieve, and will not be able to apply themselves to the methods designed to further an outcome that wasn't what they had in mind to start with.

Whenever you pick up any book, video or read any article in a magazine, just check which one of these approaches is the dominant one.

If it's the same as yours, you'll probably find yourself nodding to yourself as you're reading it. It'll make sense to you, and you'll be happy to employ what's been advised.

If it isn't, it'll sound silly, horrible, overwhelming or incomprehensible - in which case, take it back and try for a refund; and it really doesn't matter at all how well known the author, or how much experience, or how great other people say he or she is - it's a strictly personal decision, **based on your own beliefs, values, and attitudes.**

When you find a method, a book, an instructor or a writer who is in alignment with your own values, beliefs and attitudes, **your dog's training, and your abilities as your dog's teacher, will take a quantum leap**, and you will be able to achieve so much more, with so much less friction and effort, because **if you do what you believe in, you become congruent instead of indecisive - and dogs respect someone who appears to know what they're doing, more than anything else and respond accordingly.**

How To Choose The Best Trainers For Your Dog & Save Time, Money & Heartache is an

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