



## Should I Send My Dog Away For Training?

By Terri Bright, Ph. D., BCBA-D, CAAB

If your dog has behavioral issues such as reactivity or aggression, or even they are simply “disobedient,” someone has certainly suggested (or you have discovered online) that you can send them away to live with a trainer who will train your dog *for* you. For a fee (sometimes as much as \$1,000 a week), your dog will live with someone else and learn what you need them to learn. When they are delivered back to you, your dog will behave as if there were the beneficiary of a new software installation that is running smoothly. Does this sound too good to be true?

Unfortunately, that is often the case. Every week we see patients whose owners had this dream for their dog...and it did not come true. When the dog came home, even if the trainer demonstrated what the dog had learned while away, the dog’s behavior reverted to its previous problem behavior, or in some instances, became worse.

Academically-trained behaviorists rarely recommend these type of services, for these reasons:

**The Environmental Influence on Behavior:** Behavior is *contextual*. This simply means one behaves differently in different environments. You don’t swear in front of your grandmother or in church, but you might with some of your friends. Your dog may have learned some new behaviors at the trainer’s home, however, the behaviors will not instantly appear when your dog comes home. The behaviors have to be trained...at home and elsewhere, ultimately, by you.

**Generalization:** Behavior that is learned in one place/time and/or with one person does not automatically appear in the rest of the world. In a process known as *generalization*, new behavior has to be gradually transferred to other times, people and places to be truly learned. For example, you may have learned to drive beautifully in a parking lot, but you then had to learn to drive on hills and highways, and to parallel park. And though you may have passed your driver’s exam by parallel parking, if you do not do it regularly, in lots of places, it will not be easy to do. Your dog will have to re-learn everything with you, in your home and neighborhood environment.

**Treating the Cause:** If a dog is suffering from fear and anxiety-caused behavior (which is very common), being sent away from home to learn in a board-and-train kennel environment may not help, and may actually exacerbate the dog’s fear and anxiety. A qualified behaviorist (one with an advanced degree in Animal Behavior and/or Psychology, or a Veterinary Behaviorist) or credentialed dog trainer will assess your dog’s history and current behavior, make sure underlying medical causes are ruled out, and recommend a proper, peer-reviewed, safe, rewards-based course of training that is appropriate for that behavioral problem.

**Board and Train is Tempting...Beware of Fallout:** If you see or hear of someone advertising training expertise because they have trained “police” dogs in the past, be forewarned that there are things you may not know about police “K9’s” as a population of dogs. For example, they are typically “purpose-bred;” this means they come from generations of dogs that are motivated to perform police-type behaviors, such as a “bite and hold” (chase and bite, then hold onto a suspect) or scent work (the dog searches for drugs, guns, accelerants, even people.) These dogs are also bred to want to work hard for their toy-wielding trainer. This limits the number of dogs that are accepted into and that graduate from such a program.

If a dog such as this misbehaves, it receives a correction. The trainer snaps a prong collar or activates a shock collar that acts to deliver a “STOP” message to that dog; the message must be aversive enough to make that behavior go away. It is notable that some police K9’s, as well as some other dogs, may not have the known side effects of correction-based training. However, even trainers who have not trained police K9’s but who tell you they will “correct” your dog’s behavior problems may not be well-versed in the known side effects of the use of aversive collar (chain/prong/shock) corrections. These side effects are:

1. Fear and avoidance of the handler and anything in that environment;
2. Aggression as the dog attempts to stop the correction from happening;
3. Overall reduction of other behaviors that were not targeted for correction. For example, the dog could stop walking on the leash because that is how the scary thing happened.

If a dog is experiencing underlying fear and anxiety, and that is why it is misbehaving, using aversive training techniques to stop behavior can be like throwing gas on a fire. It can make the behavior worse because of these known side effects. Conversely, academically-accepted methods to change behavior include using desensitization and counter-conditioning to decrease fear and anxiety, while using rewards-based methods to teach acceptable alternative behaviors.

**Questions to ask the Trainer if You Are Considering Board and Train:** Though rare, rewards-based board and train programs exist. However, the above issues of teaching the behavior at your home and overall generalization will still apply, and your dog may still not be a good candidate for the experience. Here are recommended questions to ask any board and train facility:

- How many hours a day will my dog spend in a kennel or crate?
- What special equipment will be used for training? What food or toys will be used?
- How will you know if the training frightens my dog or if my dog has a bad reaction to it?
- Will my dog be exposed to other dogs and under what circumstances?
- How will I be able to witness the training in real time so I know how and what my dog is being trained?
- How can you assure my dog will be safe on your property?

Make sure the answers to these questions reassure you that your dog’s underlying emotions and safety will be addressed during training.

Thus, there are risks to sending dogs to board and train, and, at the end of the day, someone in your family will have to train your dog in your home environment. For that reason, the expense of board and train might be better applied to hiring a rewards-based trainer or behaviorist to work directly on the cause and best treatment for your dog, so that you can be your dog’s best trainer, as well as their best friend.