

## How to Choose a Dog Trainer

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Selecting a trainer for your dog is one of the most important decisions you will make for them. It can also be one of the most confusing. It might feel like there are infinite number of choices when beginning your search.

Unfortunately, the dog training industry remains unregulated, meaning just about anyone can call themselves a dog trainer and charge you for their services, regardless of their methods, experience, or formal training.

In a simple google search, you will find a vast variety of methods, recommendations, and opinions about the best way to train your dog. Many recommendations, including the use of aversive methods or tools, no longer align with current understanding of how to most humanely and effectively train our pets. Over the past decade, new scientific findings have shed light on the negative consequences of using aversive methods in animal training. How animals learn, just like how people learn, is based in science. Below we will review what types of training approach will be most effective for your dog, what training certifications to look for, which buzz words to avoid and why.

### What is rewards- or relationship-based training?

You might find a lot of different language used to describe a positive reinforcement dog training approach. Some common phrasing includes rewards based, relationship based, and mark/reward or clicker training. What all of these labels are describing is an approach in which you arrange the dog's environment in a way that limits the likelihood that they might make a "wrong" choice, making it easy for them to make the "right" choice, and when they practice the behavior you like, or an approximation to it, you reinforce that behavior. In other words, you aim to find ways to say "yes" as often as possible. This approach to training your dog:

- Teaches our dogs that training is fun, safe, and pain-free, while still being effective.
- Builds behavior by teaching the dog what we want them to do, rather than relying on temporary suppression of a behavior we don't like with punishment or tools that work through pain or intimidation.
- Addresses the root cause of behavior we don't like, allowing for a constructive and long-lasting solution.
- Leads to better relationships between dogs and their people.
- Is effective for all dogs, regardless of breed, age, size, or temperament.
- Is effective for all animals, including large or exotic animals like elephants, whales, giraffes, and gorillas, both in captivity and in the wild – pretty cool!

### What are aversive training methods?

An "aversive" refers to something unpleasant that occurs as a direct consequence of a behavior, interrupting or suppressing that behavior. In order to be effective, an aversive must be something that your pet will work to avoid because it is unpleasant: the avoidance of discomfort, or wanting that discomfort to stop, is what motivates your pet to stop what they are doing or not do it again. All animals will change their behavior to avoid something aversive. For example, after burning their hand on a hot stove, a child will likely never touch one again to avoid being burned.

Common aversive training methods include:

- shock collars
- citronella spray collars
- choke chains
- prong collars
- shake cans (a can filled with pennies or rocks)
- spray bottles
- physical force such as pinning, rolling, shoving, or hitting
- harsh scolding
- leash "popping" or corrections
- holding an animal's mouth closed
- pinching or scruffing an animal's neck

Aversive training methods are often touted as faster or more effective for reaching your goals, and you may even see a desired result in the short-term. However, these methods can have long-term negative effects on your pet's behavior, as well as their emotional and physical wellbeing, including:

- Learning to be afraid of you or a particular environment in which you delivered a correction rather than learning anything about the specific behavior you are aiming to correct.
- Learning to do that behavior away from you rather than in front of you, like going to the bathroom behind the couch because they have been scolded for accidents.
- Increased aggression or markers of stress, even outside of the training context.
- Learned helplessness, or learning to do nothing at all in order to avoid a potential correction.

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Trainer Jenny Efimova describes the negative effects of punishment on the human-animal bond (blog post can be found at [www.dogminded.training](http://www.dogminded.training)):

"When we use fear avoidance to teach our dogs we are creating a world in which behavior becomes risky, exploration becomes dangerous, and people become unpredictable. When we consistently punish behaviors, we inadvertently make all behavior unsafe. When we consistently employ corrections, we inadvertently make ourselves unsafe...How we train our dogs informs the very foundation of our relationship with them. When this foundation is built on fear and coercion, our relationship will reflect that. Any living being who is made to do things as a way to avoid something unpleasant will never feel safe enough to be their true self."

### What is "dominance"?

You may have seen or heard references to terms such as "alpha," "dominance," or "pack leader," while researching training options. Training based in the idea that unwanted behaviors in our pets are rooted in their desire to be "alpha," "dominant", or at the top of a social hierarchy within your household is not supported by scientific evidence. Training recommendations in accordance to this notion, by use of methods such as alpha rolling your dog, can cause unnecessary harm and stress to your pet, and can lead to the unintended fallout listed above.

For more information, refer to the **American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior**, the **American College of Veterinary Behaviorists**, and the **Association of Professional Dog Trainers** position statements on the use of these methods in animal training.

### What is "balanced" training?

"Balanced" training describes an approach using both reinforcement and punishment. That is, telling a dog when they've gotten it right, and when they're getting it wrong. While that sounds like a reasonable approach, it can be confusing for your dog and doesn't take into account what science has taught us about the most effective methods for teaching a new behavior (no matter the species). Ultimately, it can slow the learning process while running the same risks described above. If we consider our goal of teaching new behavior while also building and protecting the bond with our pet, there is no reason to include aversive tools or other forms of punishment in any training plan.

### What to avoid when selecting your dog's trainer:

- Use of phrases like "pack leader", "dominance", "submission", and "alpha"
- Use of training equipment meant to deliver a correction, or to stop a behavior that is already happening
- Use of physical manipulation or force to change the dog's behavior
- Use of phrases like "there isn't just one way to train dogs", "methods tailored to the individual dog", "using every tool in the toolbox", and using "all four quadrants" (meaning reinforcement and punishment) – while two dogs might need a different plan for learning the same behavior, the process by which they learn is the same, and has been scientifically proven to not require intimidation, or physical pain or manipulation
- Websites that don't explicitly describe the trainer's philosophy and methods for teaching your dog

Words from Jean Donaldson, Academy of Dog Trainers, author of 'The Culture Clash':

### BE A SMART DOG TRAINING CONSUMER.



- ASK:**
1. What exactly will happen to my dog if my dog gets it right?
  2. What exactly will happen to my dog if my dog gets it wrong?
  3. Are there less invasive/aversive alternatives to what you propose?

*If you don't get clear, concrete answers or are at all uncomfortable, keep shopping.*

Illustration by Lili Chin doggedrawings.net