

Selecting a Behavior Consultant

A Pet Owner's Guide

Have your pet examined by a veterinarian for a complete physical examination. More than 20% of dogs with behavior problems who were not checked by a veterinarian in more than 6 months also had a health problem. There is no use wasting money on a behavior problem when there may be a contributing health factor.

Ask for a referral. Ask your veterinarian, groomer, friends with pets and even your local animal shelters who they would recommend and why. Do they know whom they are recommending and what is the basis for their recommendation?

Qualify the consultant. Call the specialist and find out how he or she goes about working with problem pets. If they are operating on the highest ethical standards, they will want to know a great deal about you, your pet's health and a history of the problem from beginning to end. They should be especially interested in what steps you have already taken to solve the problem yourself or with other assistance.

Questions to ask the consultant:

1. Where and how long with the appointment be? (1 to 2 hours are usually sufficient.)
2. Who must attend? (Be sure everyone involved can and should attend.)
3. What will we be doing? (Get operational descriptions such as sitting and talking, working with the dog.)
4. How many appointments will be required? (This may vary depending on the problem. Follow up is essential!)
5. Will any special equipment be required or encouraged? If so, what? (This will reveal whether or not shock collars, spike collars, head collars or other items will be used. Get descriptions of what they are and how they will be used.)
6. What is the most severe physical treatment that may be required assuming the worst? (This lets you know if kneeing, kicking, hitting, jerking, hanging, alpha rollovers, etc. will be inflicted on your dog.)
7. How much will it cost? (This will vary tremendously. Be sure the fee is something you can and are willing to pay given your level of confidence in the specialist. Be sure to ask about additional charges for equipment.)
8. Do you offer any guarantees? (No ethical professional can offer guarantees on a living creature's behavior. Be very wary if you are given guarantees or any absolutes regarding the outcome of a treatment or training program.)
9. Are you a trainer or a behavior specialist? (Trainers advise a way to control behavior while behavior specialists find the cause of the behavior leaving less to control. Determine which is needed for your problem.)

With these questions answered, you can qualify the specialist on three accounts:

1. The humaneness of the methods to be employed. If you would not be willing to test the harshness of the methods on yourself or your child, follow your instinct. Violence does not solve anything and it serves to worsen the problem.
2. The cost of the program in your money, time and effort.
3. The rapport you and the specialist establish. If you and the consultant cannot communicate smoothly during explanations about the program, you are apt to have even more difficulty later when working with causes and corrections!

And finally, watch out for anyone who leads you to believe this is going to be easy. Solving a pet behavior problem is rarely simple. It requires your mental and financial effort as well as some emotional adjustments on the part of all family members.