



Selecting A Qualified Canine Professional

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF CANINE PROFESSIONALS

Choosing the right professional for your dog is an important decision that can significantly impact their behavior, emotional wellbeing, and your relationship together. It is also important to understand that not all canine professionals provide the same level of service, and not all behavior concerns require the same level of support. While there can be overlap between roles, these services are not interchangeable.

❖ Dog Training

Dog training typically focuses on teaching skills such as foundation obedience cues, manners, household routines, and day-to-day life skills. This may include things like leash walking, recall, settling in the home, place work, cooperative care foundations, and improving communication between dog and owner.

❖ Behavior Modification Training

Some trainers also work on behavior concerns such as fear, reactivity, overarousal, impulse control struggles, frustration, mild guarding concerns, or difficulty coping with everyday stressors. This work often involves implementing structured training plans to help change the dog's emotional and behavioral responses over time through management, reinforcement, desensitization, and counterconditioning. **However, not all trainers who offer behavior modification are equipped to take on more severe, multi-layered, or higher-risk cases.**

❖ Behavior Consulting

Behavior consulting is a more advanced level of behavior work that goes beyond simply teaching exercises or addressing “fixing” isolated issues. It typically involves a more comprehensive assessment of the dog’s behavior patterns, environment, stress load, learning history, triggers, household dynamics, safety concerns, and overall quality of life.

Behavior consulting often includes:

- Case assessment and behavior history analysis
- Identification of contributing factors and behavior patterns
- Safety and management planning
- Structured behavior change protocols
- Ongoing case adjustments based on the dog’s response
- Collaboration with veterinarians or other professionals when needed

This level of work is especially relevant for more complex cases involving fear, aggression, severe reactivity, chronic stress, multi-dog household conflict, bite risk, or behaviors that significantly impact daily life.

❖ Veterinary Behaviorists / Clinical Behavior Specialists

Some cases may also require support beyond the scope of even experienced trainers or behavior consultants.

A **board-certified veterinary behaviorist** is a veterinarian with advanced specialty training in animal behavior who is qualified to:

- Evaluate medical contributors to behavior
- Diagnose behavioral disorders
- Prescribe medication when appropriate
- Manage more medically or psychiatrically complex behavior cases

Not every behavior case requires veterinary behavior involvement, but a qualified behavior consultant should be able to recognize when that level of support may be appropriate and help guide that referral process when needed.

The term “**behaviorist**” is often used casually in the dog world, but in a formal sense it should not be treated as interchangeable with trainer or behavior consultant. **Because titles are often misused in this industry, it is important to evaluate a professional’s education, credentials, experience, scope of practice, and methodology - not just the title they use.** Unfortunately, dog training and canine behavior services remain largely unregulated industries, which means two professionals may advertise similar services while having vastly different education, experience, and case competency.

This guide is designed to help you ask the right questions, understand the answers, and make a more informed decision when selecting the right professional for your dog.

THE STANDARD BEHIND THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

The guidance outlined below reflects current best practices in the field of animal behavior and is aligned with recommendations from the **American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior** and the **International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants**.

AVSAB: is composed of board-certified veterinary behaviorists who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of behavioral issues. Their position statements are grounded in scientific research and clinical experience.

IAABC: is an international organization of behavior professionals who meet standards for education, case experience, and ethical practice, with a strong emphasis on humane, evidence-based methods.

Both organizations emphasize:

- Reinforcement-based training as the primary approach
- Addressing the underlying emotional drivers of behavior
- Avoiding methods that increase fear, anxiety, or stress

*****Supporting References Available - See Attachments A – C*****

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

❖ Dog Training (Foundation & Life Skills)

Typically includes:

- Foundation obedience cues
- Leash skills
- Household manners
- General life skills

These services focus primarily on teaching the dog what to do.

❖ Behavior Modification Training

Typically includes:

- Reactivity (mild – moderate)
- Overarousal / Impulse Control
- Frustration-Based Behaviors
- Early Resource Guarding Behaviors
- Difficulty coping with common environmental or social stressors

These services focus on implementing structured training plans to change behavior through reinforcement, management, desensitization, and counterconditioning.

While this work can improve emotional responses, it is often delivered through a training framework rather than full case-level analysis.

❖ Behavior Consulting

Typically includes:

- Fear, anxiety, and stress-related behaviors
- Reactivity (dogs, people, environment)
- Aggression or bite risk
- Resource guarding
- Severe separation-related distress

These services focus on:

- Understanding why the behavior is happening
- Addressing underlying emotional responses
- Creating sustainable, long-term behavior change

Behavior consulting represents a more advanced level of behavior work that involves full case assessment, planning, and ongoing adjustment.

WHY THIS DISTINCTION MATTERS

Behavior cases are often significantly more complex than they appear on the surface. In many cases, the behavior itself is only one part of the picture.

These cases may also involve:

- Safety concerns
- Chronic stress or emotional dysregulation
- Bite risk or escalation patterns
- Environmental or household management challenges
- Multi-dog or multi-human dynamics
- Medical or neurological contributors
- A need for collaboration with veterinary professionals

Behavior change is not just about teaching skills. It is also about changing the underlying emotional responses and learned associations driving the behavior. They require thoughtful assessment, case planning, and the ability to adjust the approach based on the dog's emotional state, history, environment, and level of risk. This is also where scope of practice becomes especially important.

Not every professional offering behavior modification is equipped to accurately assess case complexity, identify when additional support is warranted, or recognize when a case may be beyond their scope.

When dogs do not reach the appropriately qualified professional early enough, the consequences can be significant. In some cases:

- The behavior becomes more deeply rehearsed and more difficult to change
- Stress and conflict within the home continue to build
- Safety risk may increase
- Families may become overwhelmed, discouraged, or burned out
- Dogs may be unnecessarily rehomed or considered for behavioral euthanasia when earlier or more appropriate intervention could have changed the outcome

Unfortunately, delayed referral and under-qualified support are common obstacles in the canine behavior industry.

One of the responsibilities of a qualified behavior professional is not just to work on the behavior itself, but to recognize when a case needs a different or higher level of care, and to help the client get there appropriately.

If your dog is struggling with fear, reactivity, aggression, or severe anxiety, it is especially important to work with a professional who has:

- Experience specifically with behavior cases
 - Education in behavior science and supporting credentials
 - A clear, structured approach to behavior modification
 - The ability to recognize when referral or collaboration is needed
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KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK A TRAINER OR BEHAVIOR PROFESSIONAL

1. What training or behavior methodology do you use and emphasize?
 2. Why do you believe dogs display unwanted or concerning behaviors?
 3. What tools do you use (and not use)?
 4. What happens when a dog gets something right?
 5. What happens when a dog gets something wrong?
 6. What should progress realistically look like?
 7. What will my role be in the training process?
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WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR

1. TRAINING / BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION METHODOLOGY

Look for:

- A reinforcement-based approach grounded in behavioral science
- Focus on teaching desired behaviors, not just stopping unwanted ones
- Use of meaningful reinforcement such as food, toys, play, praise, and other things your dog finds valuable
- Emphasis on clear communication, appropriate expectations, and setting the dog up for success

For fear, anxiety, or reactivity cases, you should hear:

- Desensitization
- Counterconditioning
- Differential Reinforcement

These are scientifically supported methods used to change a dog's emotional response, not just their outward behavior.

Important Distinction: Stopping a behavior is not the same as teaching a new one. Effective training and behavior work focus on learning, not just suppression.

*****Supporting Reference Available - See Attachment A*****

2. UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR

A qualified professional should explain behavior in terms of:

- Learning history (what has been reinforced)
- Emotional state (fear, anxiety, arousal, frustration)
- Environmental factors
- Skill deficits (the dog doesn't yet know what to do)

You should hear things like:

- "The dog may be overwhelmed or over threshold."
- "We need to teach an alternative behavior."
- "Let's look at what's reinforcing this."

Red Flags:

- Dominance
- Alpha theory
- The dog is trying to "control you".
- "You need to be the leader" (without clear, humane explanation).

These concepts are outdated and not supported by current behavioral science. A qualified professional should also prioritize safety for both humans and dogs, especially in cases involving fear, reactivity, or aggression.

*****Supporting Reference Available - See Attachment B & D*****

3. TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT

Appropriate tools may include:

- Flat collar (or martingale collar for safety)
- Harness
- Long lines
- Event Marker or Bridging Stimulus (ex: verbal marker “YES”)
- Food and toy rewards (or access to other reinforcers)

A qualified professional prioritizes:

- Low-stress, humane equipment
- Proper conditioning to any tool used

Be cautious of professionals who rely on:

- Prong collars
- Choke chains
- Shock/e-collars

These tools work by applying discomfort or pain to suppress behavior. While they may interrupt behavior in the moment, they do not teach the dog what to do instead and may increase stress, fear, or fallout over time.

Did You Know?

The epidermis of a dog is only 3-5 cells thick, compared to 10-15 cells in humans. Testing equipment on humans does not provide an accurate physical representation of a dog's experience.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior has stated that aversive methods carry risks, including:

- Increased fear and anxiety
- Suppression of warning signals
- Potential escalation to aggression

*****Supporting Reference Available - See Attachment A & C*****

4. WHEN THE DOG GETS IT RIGHT

You should hear:

- The dog is reinforced (rewarded)
- Use of a marker/bridging stimulus (ex: verbal marker “yes”)
- High rate of reinforcement during learning phase
- Transition to a variable schedule of reinforcement over time as your dog progresses from:
 1. **Acquisition Phase** - *this is new*
 2. **Generalization** - *this is the same thing in different places/different people etc*
 3. **Proofing** - *the behavior is reliable with increased distance/duration/distraction*

Variable schedules of reinforcement operate similarly to how a slot machine functions – it doesn't need to pay out *every* time, the learner just needs to know there is a *possibility* it might.

This type of reinforcement schedule is the most effective at maintaining behaviors over the lifetime of your dog, while also preserving the integrity and reliability of those skills.

“If your job stopped giving you a paycheck, how would that affect your behavior?”

5. WHEN THE DOG GETS IT WRONG

A qualified professional should:

- Assess why the behavior didn't occur?
- Adjust the environment, level of difficulty, or communication.

Focus should be on evaluating how we can approach things differently in order to set our dog up for success – rather than placing onus on the dog.

You should hear:

- “We need to make this easier/lower criteria.”
- “He may be over threshold.”
- “Let’s break this down further.”

Red Flag:

- Immediate correction or punishment without evaluating cause
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6. WHAT PROGRESS SHOULD LOOK LIKE

A qualified professional will set realistic expectations. Behavior change is not a linear process, there are no “instant fix” solutions.

You should hear:

- “We’re working to change both behavior and emotional response.”
- “Progress may be gradual, especially in fear or reactivity cases.”
- “Setbacks are normal and part of the learning process.”

Be cautious of:

- Guarantees of immediate results
 - Promises to “fix” behavior in a set number of days
 - Emphasis on quick suppression rather than long-term change
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7. YOUR ROLE IN THE TRAINING PROCESS

Effective training requires active participation from you.

A qualified professional will:

- Provide clear guidance, structure, and support
- Expect consistency between sessions

- Ask for practice, feedback, and sometimes video review

Behavior change happens through:

- Repetition
- Consistency
- Clear communication

Be cautious of:

- Programs that do not involve you in the learning process
- Promises that your dog will be “trained for you” without follow-through

TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION

A qualified professional should be open and clear about:

- Their methods and why they use them
- What your training or behavior plan will look like/how the process works
- Expected timelines (frequency and duration of sessions) and limitations
- What services they do and do not offer
- Whether they are able to recognize when a case is outside their scope
- Whether they refer out appropriately when needed
- Whether they are open to collaborating with other supporting professionals (primary veterinarian, veterinary behaviorist, etc.)
- Whether they are able to communicate clearly with other professionals involved in the case when appropriate
- Their education (including continuing education) and credentials
- Safety considerations

You should never feel:

- Confused about what is being done with your dog
- Pressured into using tools or methods you are uncomfortable with
- Dismissed when asking questions

CREDENTIALS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Because dog training is unregulated, credentials help indicate a commitment to professional standards.

Look for professionals who hold certifications such as:

- CPDT or CBCC
- ADT or CDBC
- CSAT (Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer)
- FPPE (Family Paws Parent Educator)
- Fear Free Certified Trainer (Professional Member)
- IAABC membership
- CCPDT membership
- Pet Professional Guild membership
- Karen Pryor Academy (KPA) Certified Training Partner
- Victoria Stillwell Academy
- Family Dog Mediator (FDM) through L.E.G.S.
- Michael Shikashio's Aggression in Dogs Master Class Graduate

These indicate:

- Ongoing education
- Adherence to ethical guidelines
- Alignment with evidence-based practices

Not all trainers are qualified to take on behavior cases. Working outside of one's scope can increase risk, particularly in cases involving fear, anxiety, or aggression.

APPROPRIATE USE OF TITLES

The title “behaviorist” is not a casual label. It is typically reserved for:

- Board-Certified Veterinary Behaviorists (DACVB)
- Individuals with a PhD in animal behavior or a related field

If someone is calling themselves a “behaviorist” without these qualifications, it is appropriate to ask for clarification. The term “behavioralist” is not a recognized professional title and should be considered a significant red flag.

Additionally, professionals advertising behavior modification or behavior consulting services should be able to demonstrate both formal education and applied experience.

Listing “experience only” without credentials may indicate:

- A lack of sufficient time in the field to qualify for certification
- Or a lack of alignment with the standards required to obtain them

Behavior cases such as aggression, fear, or severe anxiety require a higher level of knowledge and skill, and working without appropriate education or oversight can carry risk.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Training is not just about obedience. It directly impacts:

- Your dog’s emotional wellbeing
- Their sense of safety in the environment
- The long-term success of behavior change

Methods that rely on fear, intimidation, or discomfort may produce short-term results, but often:

- Do not address the root cause
- Can worsen underlying issues
- Increase risk of future behavior problems

Effective training and behavior work focus on:

- Understanding behavior
- Building skills
- Creating emotional safety
- Supporting both the dog and the human

The right professional should make you feel:

- Supported
- Educated
- Empowered
- Never blamed or intimidated

You deserve a thoughtful plan and an approach that prioritizes both results *and* wellbeing. If you ever have questions about training approaches or would like a second opinion, I'm always happy to offer guidance and, if requested, referrals to qualified professionals.

ATTACHED REFERENCES

Please use the links below (blue underlined text) to access these resources.

Attachment A – [AVSAB Position Statement on Humane Dog Training](#)

Attachment B – [AVSAB Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory](#)

Attachment C – [IAABC Standards of Practice](#)

Attachment D – [Debunking the “Alpha Dog” Theory](#)

A Gentle Reminder

“Your dog is not *giving* you a hard time, they are *having* a hard time.”

A Little Pig Named Pavarotti...

This handout was created in honor of a “little pig” named Pavarotti, who helped shape the trajectory of both my life, and my career.

Pav found his way into my home, and my heart, many years ago. His life before he came to me was not an easy one, and he bore many literal and figurative scars to show for it. His previous owner was not kind to him (I won't go into detail there, but it is one of the worst abuse cases I have personally encountered). At one point they had even attempted to schedule him for euthanasia, stating he was “hopeless” and “untrainable” - I am forever grateful to the veterinarian who refused to perform the procedure that day.

After he found his way to me, we faced many behavioral and medical challenges in those initial months and years. If I'm being fully transparent, there were many days I felt quite overwhelmed and uncertain of how we could possibly find a path forward. What if I had made a mistake?

There were also many moments where I feared that we would be forced to say goodbye before I would even get the chance to show him that the world is a safe place, and that some humans *can* be trusted.

After his initial decompression period, it became evident quickly that even with my educational background (psychology) + experience with dog training, his needs far exceeded my current skill set. I was able to connect with a wonderful trainer, and now friend, who after evaluating him, very appropriately referred us to a veterinary behaviorist.

After our initial consultation, I made a commitment to Pav that I would learn everything I possibly could about canine cognition/behavior so I could become the person he needed.

*****I was incredibly fortunate that I was able to get access to those resources/that referral back then, especially as quickly and directly as I did. The process of finding those resources truly highlighted for me how challenging it is to navigate that space and find reputable resources.*****

Pav truly tested my sanity on most days, and through him I learned the value of patience and adjusting expectations. He had extensive medical needs and required multiple complex surgeries to repair the injuries he had endured in his younger years - I have always jokingly remarked that I probably could have funded an entire second race car with his medical bills.

Pav was ultimately diagnosed with canine dysfunctional disorder, which is thought to be a similar behavior profile to autism in humans, as well as generalized anxiety disorder. Pav had no social skills, and he was very particular about his sensory needs and sensitivities. He was also incredibly rigid in his routines, and any deviation would result in immediate complaints filed with management in the form of his trademark “velociraptor screeching” (at quite an impressive decibel, I might add).

Too much stimulation would send him into a meltdown.

Not enough?... Also, meltdown.

His episodes could last for hours before he would return to baseline. It took years of hard work before he was able to cuddle for any length of time. He would get so overwhelmed by it (because he loved it so much) that he would struggle to regulate himself (...also meltdown).

Pav was a tremendous PITA to live with, and I loved every bit of him for it.

During our 6 years together, Pav and I achieved many incredible things. Most importantly, I got to help him find his place in the world and in return, he helped me find my purpose.

Over the years I have had the distinct honor and privilege of being able to support countless dogs like Pavarotti, and their respective humans...

Dogs at risk of falling through the cracks.

Dogs who had been set up to fail.

Dogs who just needed someone to listen, and to advocate for them.

While your journey may ultimately guide you down a different path from here towards working with another professional, please know you can always find support here if you are ever in need. My sincerest hope is that this handout may serve as a compass to help make this process just a little easier for you along the way.

As always, I wish you and your dog the very best.



Until next time, little pig. ❤️

“...and I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

With Appreciation,

Seren Maxwell (Owner)

Apex Canine Behavior & Training LLC

Evidenced-Based Behavior and Training Support.

www.apexcaninebehavior.com

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