

Vetting the Unregulated World of Dog Training: How to Find Real Experts

Choosing a trainer is one of the most critical decisions you will make for your dog's well-being and your family's peace of mind. Because a trainer influences your dog's behavior, emotional health, and safety, hiring the wrong person can lead to disastrous results. Ineffective or harsh methods can worsen behavioral issues, instill deep-seated fear, or even trigger aggression, fracturing the bond between you and your companion. A poorly trained, fearful, or aggressive dog is not a candidate for therapy work.

Compounding the risk in hiring a trainer is a massive regulatory gap in the pet industry: the dog training profession is entirely unregulated. There are no state or federal licensure requirements, standardized tests, or mandatory government oversight to ensure competence. Essentially, anyone can buy a leash, print a business card, and claim to be a professional dog behavior expert, regardless of their actual experience, education, or ethics.

Two resources that are helpful can be found online. The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <https://www.ccpdt.org/dog-owners/certified-dog-trainer-directory/> and the AKC website, where you can search for a CGC Evaluator in your area: <https://www.apps.akc.org/cgc-evaluator/>

Alternatively, observe well-trained dogs in public places. Approach the owner/handler respectfully and compliment the dog's good looks and excellent behavior! Then inquire about the dog's training. Ask for contact information about the trainer used. Notice the dogs of your family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and other therapy teams. Are any of the dogs well trained? If so, ask who trained them.

Once you have identified a few trainers in your area, contact them and ask specifically about their "toolbox" and training philosophy. Essentially, three primary philosophies of dog training exist, and they differ based on how they use motivation and consequences to shape behavior. "Traditional" training relies heavily on corrections and aversives, using physical guidance pressure, or punishment to stop unwanted behaviors and enforce obedience. "Positive Reinforcement" training focuses entirely on rewarding desired behaviors with treats, praise, or play, or whatever the dog finds rewarding, while ignoring or redirecting unwanted actions without using punishment. "Balanced" training combines both approaches, utilizing rewards like treats to teach and motivate new behaviors while also using mild corrections to discourage inappropriate choices.

While we understand that some trainers use choke, prong, e-collars in their training methods, when you are making visits for Canines for Christ, none of these collars are acceptable. Therefore, training will need to accommodate the use of one of the following a flat collar, martingale collar, gentle leader or harness.

Finally, read independent client reviews on platforms like Google or Facebook and ask for a consultation or to observe a class before hiring anyone. Remember, too, that a great trainer will be patient with both your dog and you and teach you how to be an effective handler, rather than using a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Ask the trainer how to manage situations when your dog "gets it wrong." A knowledgeable trainer will recognize when a task is too difficult or too advanced for you and your dog and will adjust accordingly to guide you skillfully towards your training goals. If your dog is a rare or unusual breed, comes from an uncertain or unknown environment, or requires accommodation for special emotional or physical needs and challenges, ask the trainer about his/her experience in that area.

Careful vetting of trainers in your area can protect your dog from outdated, harmful techniques. Take the time to verify a trainer's credentials, experience, and reputation to ensure you are partnering with a knowledgeable, ethical expert who uses positive reinforcement. Ultimately, doing your homework upfront sets both you and your canine companion up for a lifetime of safe, happy, and successful learning.

Your C4C Canine Resource Team includes Allison Hanscom, Kelly Corl, and Lisa Gainer combines decades of experience, education, certification and service to ensure that you have access to quality ethical training advice and expert guidance. They author articles like this one, post training videos to the C4C website and social media pages and offer webinars through Zoom throughout the year.