



**IN BRIEF: PRACTICE AND PROCEDURE**

# Good trainers: How to identify one and why this is important to your practice of veterinary medicine

Produced by the Advanced Behavior Course at the North American Veterinary Conference, Post Graduate Institute (NAVC PGI), 2004<sup>1</sup>

## Purpose

The purpose of this brief article is to demonstrate the value of identifying “good trainers” and incorporating this knowledge into your practice. The following recommendations represent a consensus document compiled by the authors as one of the final projects in the Advanced Applied Clinical Behavioral Medicine course at the 2004 NAVC PGI. Many of the authors are now using these recommendations in their practices in ways that have increased their productivity and altered the way they now practice medicine.

## Win-win-win situation for pets, clients, and veterinary staff

Behavior exhibited by patients affects all aspects of the veterinary experience. Pets who exhibit good, basic manners can be encouraged to use those manners to have a more comfortable veterinary experience. The enhanced comfort of any patient affects the care that they receive, the efficiency with which the staff can do their jobs, the stress and

distress levels of other patients, and practice economics. The recommendations in this article are equally applicable to cats and dogs, but most people still do not think about training cats and engaging in early social exposure that will make cats less fractious (Seksel, 2001).

## Training is a quality of life issue for pets, and it affects your bottom line

1. Calm, well-behaved patients are a pleasure to see. Whether these pets are at your practice for a wellness check-up or because they are ill, cats and dogs who have good manners and who are comfortable in a veterinary setting are those whom you look forward to seeing.
2. Examination of a cat or a dog who sits and looks at you when requested saves time and decreases the stress of the veterinary experience for all staff, patients, and clients.
3. Patients who are well mannered are easy to take to the vet and so will be brought in for evaluation more often. In addition to the obvious economic benefits for the practice, the health benefits to the pet are clear: any illness will be recognized and treated earlier, with a better prognosis.
4. Pets who are well behaved are those with whom clients do not have to struggle. If clients must struggle with their pets, or if pets struggle during veterinary exams, clients worry that the struggle is hurting their pets. If clients fear that a veterinary visit physically or psychologically damages their pet, they will wait to have the pet seen. This wait may be injurious to the pet's physical health. Well-behaved pets will be brought in as a first choice, not a last.
5. If pets are seen earlier, they are diagnosed earlier, which saves lives. Clients are also less willing to forgo

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Brammeier, DVM, Jan Brennan, DVM, Sondra Brown, DVM, Deb Bryant, DVM, Debbie Calnon, BVSc (Australia), Tamera Cole Stenson, DVM, Gary Colwin (Australia), Steve Dale, Cristina Dominguez, DVM (Spain), Dennis Dougherty, DVM, Eva Dudzic, DVM (Canada), Kathy Gaughan, DVM, Ute Jung, DVM, Kim Kendall, BVSc (Australia), Michelle Lem, DVM (Canada), Gaea Mitchel, DVM, Randi Olson, DVM, Beth Procassini, VMD, Peggy Rucker, DVM, Debra Shirley, DVM, Susan Simmons, DVM, Gail Stevenson, DVM, Steven Stratemeyer, DVM, Kim Taylor, DVM, Sally-Ann Williams, BVSc (Australia). Course leaders were Karen L. Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVB, and Kersti Seksel, BVSc, MRCVS MA (Hons), FACVSc (Animal Behaviour), Dipl. ACVB.

Address reprint requests and correspondence: Karen L. Overall, Center for Neurobiology and Behavior, Psychiatry Dept Translational Research Laboratory School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, 125 South 30th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Email: overallk@mail.med.upenn.edu

treatment in a well-behaved pet, and instead seek to do whatever is possible to help the pet, allowing veterinarians to practice true state-of-the-art medicine, which then saves even more lives.

6. If clients have gone through the process of training their pets, they have become better educated by watching their pets and learning how their pets communicate while working with them. These clients read their pets better, better meet the pet's social needs because they understand them, and have fewer behavioral complaints about their pets (Lowe and Bradshaw, 2001; Rooney and Bradshaw, 2001). Clients who have learned to seek and use training information will also seek more help and information from the veterinarian when they feel that they need it.
7. Many studies have indicated what veterinarians have long suspected: if the client likes the pet and does not find him or her annoying, the human-animal bond is enhanced. In contrast, clients who have to struggle with a pet and don't like the animal are more likely to relinquish or euthanize that pet (Salman et al., 2000).
8. Good trainers work with veterinarians and refer clients back to the veterinarian whenever they suspect a medical or nontraining behavioral issue. Good trainers may often notice these issues before the clients do.
9. Good trainers free staff to deal with core medical issues by answering many questions about normal development and through the instruction of manners and tricks. Doing so, in turn, allows more efficient use of staff and decreases staff stress.
10. Happy clients refer new patients. Knowledgeable clients will seek out veterinarians who understand the importance of reducing stress at veterinary visits. Good trainers who also understand this concept are an essential referral conduit in a treatment partnership, and they will recommend vets who understand and address the pet's behavioral needs.
11. The fact that better and more thorough physical exams are possible when the pet is well mannered creates positive feedback, and clients then continue to seek better and more thorough exams. The result is enhanced diagnostics, when warranted, and income.

## What to look for in a trainer

- A. Audit obedience, manners, and companion animal classes. Never refer clients to trainers if you haven't been to at least one class—even if you have talked to the trainer on the phone.
  1. Observe the trainer's communication skills, both with people and with pets.
  2. Observe the training methods.
    - a) Are the dogs happy? Dogs enjoy good, humane training experiences.
    - b) What methods does the trainer use to stop unwanted behavior? These methods should consist

of asking for substitute behaviors or humane restraint if the dog is in peril, but they should never include physical punishment.

- c) Are the clients participating and happy? Clients have fun in good and humane training classes.
- d) Does a dog, cat, or client look confused, and if so, how is this confusion addressed?
- e) Do the clients look stressed and confused, and if so, how is this situation addressed?
- f) How many animals are in the class?
  - (1) One of the large training associations in the USA, The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT), recommends no more than 6 pups per 2 trainers.
  - (2) For adult dogs, 6 dogs per 1 trainer is acceptable if "special needs" (eg, dogs who are overly aggressive or fearful) dogs don't make up the majority of the class.
  - (3) The pets-to-trainer ratio can be cautiously increased with experience and confidence, depending on the behavior of the dogs participating.
3. Does everyone have reasonable expectations? Are the conformation classes designed specifically for people and dogs who will participate in the show ring experience, or are there dogs in these classes because there are no companion dog classes? If the focus is on conformation and this goal is not what is desired, clients should find another trainer.
4. Are the classes age-matched for the "emotional" and social well being of the pets and the clients?
  - a) In the puppy socialization class, all pups should graduate by 16 weeks. Therefore, the pups must start at a relatively young age if the duration of the classes is 6–8 weeks.
  - b) Juvenile dogs that are 4-6 months old should be grouped together at no more than 6 dogs per trainer.
  - c) Adult classes are suitable for most dogs older than 6 months if there is at least 1 trainer for every 6 dogs. For "special needs" dogs (eg, those who are fearful, withdrawn, or overly boisterous), a subadult class that groups dogs who are similar in behavior into small, intensive classes (4-6 dogs per instructor) can be a valuable alternative.
5. What will be taught in the class, and is there a formal outline? Good classes should have a lesson plan, a printed outline, and handouts for every class summarizing the main lessons of the week.
  - a) Do the classes have goals and organization?
    - (1) Is the emphasis on good manners that are encouraged only by positive methods (eg, no hitting, no "pop and jerk," no "stringing up," no "hanging" of dogs, et cetera)?
    - (2) Do the instructors understand dog signals?

- (3) Do the instructors understand how dogs learn?
  - (4) Are the dogs relaxed and quiet when requested to be so during and after the class?
- B. Approve the facilities.
1. Is there a way to control the level of distractions for dogs of various needs (eg, noise-reducing tiles, ex-pens, collapsible crates, barriers, et cetera)?
  2. Is the building physically secure? Are free-run areas well gated with locks humans, but not dogs, can open? Are there 2 secured doors to every outdoor exit in case a dog becomes loose? Is there a fire plan?
  3. Are electrical cords and outlets protected, and are sharps containers and any toxic solutions secured away from the dogs?
  4. What sanitary considerations have been addressed? Are the classes run hygienically?
    - a) All flooring should be easily disinfected. Even acoustical rubber tiles can be hosed and removed if necessary.
    - b) Are feces composted or disposed of in a suitable and uniform manner?
    - c) Are paper towels available in an emergency?
    - d) Is there a place to wash a dog's bottom if he or she becomes ill?
    - e) Are spray bottles of disinfectants placed at strategic places with paper towels, and mops and buckets with clean water?
    - f) Are clients and trainers encouraged to wash their hands often, and is soap (the waterless kind is preferred) readily available?
- C. Know what liability protection is available.
1. Is the trainer insured? In the USA, APDT requires that their CPDTs carry liability insurance.
  2. Does the trainer insist on a health certificate with proof of the requisite vaccinations?
  3. How does the trainer deal with a dog that someone fears or that may put people or other animals at risk? A written statement of concern and sequestration or transfer to a more appropriate class can be appropriate measures.
- D. What are the trainer's credentials and experience?
1. APDT and many other organizations offer didactic lecture and practical labs on learning theory and its application. Has the trainer taken any of these courses?
  2. In what type of continuing education (CE) does the trainer engage? How often does he or she do so? Does the trainer post the continuing education certificates of completion? There are now numerous CE courses, lectures, and labs run by a number of trainers and training organizations. Additionally, many veterinary meetings that focus on behavior also allow trainers to attend. Trainers should post or keep a binder of their CE experience as they accrue it so that the client can evaluate whether the trainer is exposed to the most recent knowledge.
3. What books does the trainer recommend, how recent are they, and why does he or she recommend them? Is there a "bookshelf" for clients to peruse?
- E. What training tools—in addition to their brains—do the trainers use?
1. Good tools promote calm and relaxed behavior, and efficient learning that is in the best interests of the dog and the dog-human team. Good tools include:
    - a) small, bite-sized treats (check for food allergies first!!!)
    - b) leashes
    - c) head collars
    - d) flat collars
    - e) harnesses
    - f) praise
    - g) toys (as a reinforcer of good behavior)
  2. Tools that should be avoided because they increase fear and anxiety:
    - a) shock collars / electric collars / e-collars / static collars
    - b) prong collars
    - c) "correction" collars
    - d) choke collars, choke chains (sometimes euphemistically referred to as training collars)
  3. Some tools can be problematic or become problematic when used incorrectly, but you might not think so at the outset. Examples include:
    - a) Flexi leads: Flexi leads are not training tools. If the dog does not know how to walk nicely on a lead, he will not learn using a Flexi lead alone. Also, Flexi leads allow dogs to explore without overt supervision and without the attention of the client. Thus, the dog can become a victim of another dog, a bicycle, or a car, or the dog may injure someone that he or she trips with the lead when turning a corner or lunging through crowds. Finally, the handle of these flexible leashes is difficult to impossible to use well if you are elderly, young, have small hands, or have arthritis. If this handle is pulled from the clients hands it can become an airborne weapon and do damage to the dog or to another individual.
    - b) Citronella collars: Citronella collars suppress reactive barking by using an interruptive stimulus—a burst of air scented with citronella—that is offensive to most dogs. For some dogs, the stimulus is easy to ignore, whereas for others—including many dogs with noise phobias—the "spsst" of air is terrifying. If a dog who is terrified by the "spsst" is crated when the citronella collar functions, the dog could panic because he or she is trapped in—what is for them—a phobic situation, which will make any behavior problem worse. Dogs who bark because they are distressed

will not be helped by such collars and may be hurt because the stimulus appears unpredictable to them. Finally, some dogs and clients are allergic to the citronella oil.

- c) Clickers: While there is a very low risk of causing problematic behavior with the use of a clicker, clients can easily overuse it. When this overuse happens, the client micromanages the dog's time and behaviors and may make anxious dogs worse. Down time where dogs can be dogs is really an essential element in any canine-human relationship.
  - d) When used correctly, a crate is a great tool for house training, but it is not an appropriate tool for dealing with separation anxiety.
- F. What is positive training? Positive training simply means that you reward desirable behavior, ignore or redirect undesirable behavior, and avoid the "pop and jerk" pattern of dog training.
1. Positive training is based on a reward structure that encourages the dog to want to work more with you. In other words, it's motivational, encouraging the dog to explore behaviors and situations that will engender the reward.
  2. Positive training is only reward based: there is no punishment or "correction." When the dog engages in a behavior that the client desires, the dog is taught to engage in that behavior more often by being instantly and continually rewarded for the behavior.
  3. Positive training can involve having the dog pay attention to something that is coupled to the reward (eg, targeting). In targeting, the dog is taught to go to a spot, touch a spot, touch a person, et cetera, as a default behavior whenever the dog is given the appropriate signal. The dog is then rewarded. For example, when meeting other dogs, one client might say, "Touch," and her dog automatically sits next to her and puts his nose to her knee, for which she gives him a treat. In this case, because the dog took himself out of the situation, was rewarded, and sits, he is calmer and now can enter the social interaction with the other dogs in a calmer, considered, deliberate manner. Such "tricks" are godsend for anxious dogs who need some quiet time to process information.
  4. Lure training: Lure training can be a part of positive training, when done correctly. If clients want dogs to learn to lie in their beds, sit, lie down, or go to a certain spot, they can couple the verbal cue (eg, "bed") to the process where they hold the treat in front of the dog, who targets it, and then the clients moves the treat to a spot or in a manner that encourages compliance with the request. For example, young puppies can easily and safely be taught to sit using lure training. The pup is asked to sit, and while the word is repeated, the treat is slowly moved from the dog's nose to over his or her head. As a puppy

tips up his or her head the sit occurs automatically. As soon as the pup's bottom hits the ground, the client says, "Good sit," and gives the puppy the treat. Luring is particularly useful with puppies who don't know much and have short attention spans. Please note that there is a huge difference between luring and bribing. We don't need or want to bribe dogs, because bribes reinforce undesirable behaviors. A dog is bribed when he or she is given the treat before executing the appropriate behavior in order to stop the dog—at least temporarily—from engaging in the inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, in the language of learning, when you use a bribe, you have just rewarded and reinforced the behavior that you wish to extinguish. Not good.

- G. What about punishment? There are many pitfalls of punishment:
1. In most animals, punishment increases anxiety and fear. This increase can be noted directly, through behaviors, and has been measured in a number of species by monitoring changes in neurochemistry. The neurochemical changes associated with anxiety and fear interfere with learning appropriate behaviors but facilitate learning that the individual associated with the punishment is a threat.
  2. Punishment ruins relationships. Punishment teaches animals to be wary of the punisher because—in truth—the punisher is a threat.
  3. Punishment inhibits desirable learning. By activating the amygdala, the region of the brain that is the first step in creating acquired fears, punishment interferes with a neuroanatomical response that would be associated with learning the desired behaviors.
  4. Punishment does not tell the pet what to do. Punishment only tells the pet what NOT to do. Unfortunately, there is an almost infinite set of choices of things that we and our pets should not do, but if we had to go through all of them before we learned what was desired, learning would be hopeless. No one can learn associations for learning (eg, eliminate only outside) by punishment because the essential information is missing, and punishment, itself, teaches something we did not intend.
  5. Punishment makes animals more reactive, so it increases aggression and arousal. Any animal that was already aggressive will become worse when punished, because now there is little certainty that the person punishing them is a threat. Increase in arousal, particularly if associated with fear or aggression, also makes it difficult to impossible to learn—or even to offer—appropriate behaviors.
  6. Punishment increases the risk of physical and psychological injury. Dogs manhandled with choke chains and prong collars often have laryngeal, esophageal, thyroidal, and tracheal damage. Recurrent laryngeal nerve damage or paralysis can be sequelae



**Photo A** See text for details of behavioral signals

and may be detected early by a change in bark. Additionally, physical punishment, like beating, can break bones and damage internal organs. Fortunately, patterns of injury associated with abuse are now widely examined and the criteria have been published (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). Clients often think that the dog benefited from punishment because the undesirable behavior stopped. Close examination of the actual changes in behaviors usually indicates that lots of normal behaviors stopped also, and that the dog or cat is spending more time engaged in escape, hiding, and vigilance and scanning behaviors (behaviors all associated with anxiety) than in normal affiliative canine and feline behaviors. Please note that dog abuse is tightly coupled to child and spousal abuse. There is now no excuse for veterinarians not to screen for routine signs (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001d).

H. What's the difference between obedience and "manners"?

1. Obedience is a sport, and there are competitions in it.
2. Manners are life skills that allow you to comfortably experience a variety of events, including participating in a sporting event, and then returning home to easily engage in another activity, no matter how different.

I. How can we distinguish between relaxed dogs and anxious dogs? In this set of photos, the same dog is shown. Prior to treatment with behavior modification, this dog always looked like he does in **Photo A**. In fact, all of the clients' pretreatment photos of the dog show the same signs of anxiety: tense face with contracted musculature, pricked and alert ears, tail clamped against the butt and legs, legs closed in to cover the abdomen and the chest, and contracted jaw musculature. In contrast, after treatment [**Photo B**], the dog was able to relax, with his tail in a species-typical posture behind him, his legs open and relaxed, his jaw relaxed, his facial musculature

relaxed, and his ears at angles that indicate that he is not constantly on auditory alert. In fact, now he can play with toys—a huge event in his life (photos courtesy of one of Dr. Kersti Seksel's clients).

## Summary

Good trainers should be able to work with the veterinarian to help special needs pets. The veterinarian should need to know when to refer a problem to a specialist (veterinary behaviorist) and to feel comfortable doing so. Working with all aspects of behavior requires a true partnership, and everyone benefits from the outcome. The ability to blend the expertise of a qualified trainer, veterinarian, veterinary behaviorist, and conscientious client will ensure a long, happy, healthy relationship between human beings and their non-human companions. Many practices are finding that adding a dedicated veterinary behavior technician to their staff has greatly increased client satisfaction. Future editions of this column will address the role of behavior technicians and the impact they can have on your practice and on the bond between owner and pet.

## Resources cited within this article:

Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT)  
 5096 Sand Road SE  
 Iowa City, IA 52240-8217  
 1-800-PET-DOGS  
 1-800-738-3647  
<http://www.apdt.com/>

The APDT offers certification for dog trainers through a rigorous test in applied learning and canine behavior, and



**Photo B** See text for details of behavioral signals

required continuing education. CPDTs are supposed to be skilled in and only use positive training techniques, but interviewing anyone with whom you may work or recommend is prudent.

### **Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (SVBT)**

SVBT welcomes all veterinary technicians and nurses as members, but restricts voting rights to those licensed / certified / registered. This group provides continuing education at most major veterinary meetings in the USA and has a board of advisors that includes a number of diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. SVBT's long-term goal is specialty certification in behavior, as has occurred for technicians in anesthesia and emergency and critical care.

<http://www.svbt.org>

### **American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB)**

Diplomates of the ACVB are the only individuals who can legally be termed "specialists" in veterinary behavioral medicine. Information about membership, qualified individuals, locations, et cetera, can be found at: <http://www.dacvb.org>

The Animal Behavior Society (ABS) certifies Applied Animal Behaviorists who may be veterinarians or PhD holders, or both. Many diplomates of ACVB are also certified by the ABS as Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists.

<http://www.animalbehavior.org>

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) publishes a directory of member veterinarians who are interested in veterinary behavioral medicine and who may also see patients with behavioral problems. Most of the members are not specialists and are not board certified, but specialists may also be members. The standard of expectation varies with qualification, and many AVSAB members hope to be board certified in the future.

<http://www.avsab.us>

### **References**

- Ascione, F.R., Arkow, P., 1999. *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention*. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN.
- Lowe, S.E., Bradshaw, J.W.S., 2001. Ontogeny of individuality in the domestic cat in the home environment. *Anim. Behav.* 61, 231-237.
- Munro, H.M.C., Thrusfield, M.V., 2001a. "Battered pets": Non-accidental injuries in pets. *J. Sm. Anim. Pract.* 42, 279-290.
- Munro, H.M.C., Thrusfield, M.V., 2001b. "Battered pets": Sexual abuse. *J. Sm. Anim. Pract.* 42, 333-336.
- Munro, H.M.C., Thrusfield, M.V., 2001c. "Battered pets": Munchausen syndrome by proxy (factitious illness by proxy). *J. Sm. Anim. Pract.* 42, 385-389.
- Munro, H.M.C., Thrusfield, M.V., 2001d. "Battered pets": Features that raise suspicion on non-accidental injuries. *J. Sm. Anim. Pract.* 42, 218-226.
- Rooney, N.J., Bradshaw, J.W.S., Robinson, I.H., 2001. Do dogs respond to play signals given by humans? *Anim. Behav.* 61, 715-722.
- Salman, M.D., Hutchison, J., Ruch-Gallie, R., New, J.G., Jr, Scarlett, J.M., Kass, P.H., 2000. Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci.* 3, 93-106.
- Seksel, K., 2001. *Training Your Cat*. Hyland House, Flemington, VIC, Australia.