

Choosing a Trainer & Degree to Avoid Behavior Problems

Over 75% of dog owners consider their pet to have at least one behavior problem. Common problems include aggressive or destructive behavior and housebreaking problems that often lead to a less than satisfying Human/Animal bond and, in millions of cases, the surrender of that pet to be "adopted" by another owner or euthanized as a result. Effective treatment for behavior problems in dogs and cats is available through professional behavior consultants with training and degrees in the fields of animal behavior, zoology, psychology and veterinary medicine. The veterinary behavior specialist diagnoses the specific cause of the problem behavior, and works with the owner to implement effective treatment for the problem.

One simple way to avoid many future behavior problems is to choose an appropriate pet for your needs in the first place. To begin, you must take the many factors in your lifestyle into account, including how much time you will spend at home with the pet, your level of energy (especially for elderly pet owners), your proximity to neighbors, need for a territorial pet to discourage thieves versus an easy going/accepting dog that must tolerate a dense social community of people, etc. For pet owners who will be gone from home extensively, a cat may be the more appropriate pet since, unlike many dogs, most do fine when left alone for extended periods of time each day. It is strongly recommended that you do at least as much careful research and invest as much time in choosing the appropriate dog (that your family will hopefully *live with* for 10-15 years) as you would choosing a car that you will only drive for a few years and can be returned to the manufacturer if you get a "lemon." Set yourself up for success!

Once you decide to get a dog, you must decide among a wide range of breeds in all kinds of shapes, colors, sizes, hair types, and behavioral predispositions. In addition, there are many wonderful mixed breed dogs available but their behavior is more difficult to predict (due to the very genetic mixing which produces them). Remember that all puppies are cute and cuddly, but that "cuteness" soon fades and what remains is a dog with normal behaviors for that species and particular breed. Breed predispositions for certain behavioral characteristics can be predicted. Examples include: Excitability, General Activity, Snapping at Children, Excessive Barking, Trainability, Aggressive Tendencies, Dominance over Owner, Destructiveness, etc. A good source to find these breed predispositions is the book *The Perfect Puppy* by Benjamin and Lynette Hart, which represents a statistically controlled summary of 56 breeds (only book based on statistically valid study). *The Right Dog for You* by Daniel Tortora also presents similar information for more breeds, but without the statistical validation. There are also several additional books that have been published including "Your Purebred Puppy: A Buyer's Guide" authored by Michele Lowell and published in 1991 by Holt & Co. and several others including Stan Coren's *Why We Love the Dogs We Do: How to Find the Dog that Matches Your Personality*, Firefly Books, 2000 and *Choosing a Dog for Dummies* by Walkowicz. More recently web sites have appeared that help guide you through the process of choosing a pet and breed selection advice; these are usually sponsored by major pet food companies or national humane groups. Knowledgeable individuals such as local veterinarians, breeders, trainers or members of a dog club can also give you the benefit of their own experiences with certain individual breeds and particular blood lines in your local area. *There is no "best breed" which fits all people and all home environments.*

After choosing a breed, you should try to find at least two or three people who have adult members of that breed (and the sex you are looking for if possible) and visit the dogs in their own environment. Remember that you will be living with the adult dog for all but a few short months of puppyhood. If you like what you find then look for a reputable breeder using a guide such as the San Diego County Dog and Cat Breeders Directory, or get recommendations from your veterinary hospital and local dog trainers and breed or obedience clubs. Note how these dogs all interact with members of the family (including children), strangers, and other dogs or cats. Be sure the puppy was raised in a loving, secure and non-traumatic environment. Study the litter to find a balanced puppy that is neither withdrawn from people nor overly pushy. Seeing that a puppy responds comfortably to being gently held on its side or back may be helpful, but most "formal puppy temperament tests" have been shown to be a poor predictor of ultimate adult behavior. In most cases, puppies should be adopted around 7-9 weeks of age, depending on how good the breeder's environment is as well as your own ability to provide a good learning environment once you get the puppy home. If at all possible, visit the site where the puppy is being raised and meet the "mother", siblings and the "father", if available. If you choose to give a mixed breed dog a much needed loving home, check out local animal shelters, humane societies and rescue organizations that almost always have dogs or puppies that need homes. Be aware that many adolescent and older dogs may have been surrendered for behavior issues and be very careful about your selection of a "second hand" dog.

Training Your New Puppy

Once adopted, you should immediately begin working with your puppy to establish good habits and avoid behavior problems. Your first few days are critical. Avoid letting the puppy have unrestricted and unsupervised access to your entire house nor relegating it to be alone in the backyard since both of these will set your puppy up for bad behaviors. Use gentle and appropriate confinement, but avoiding the trap of abusing this useful training technique by leaving the puppy alone too long. For several decades now, progressive dog trainers have recognized the importance of Kindergarten Puppy Training which is actually more like a combination of puppy play socialization and education of the owners on how to raise a healthy, well-behaved puppy. Puppies have a "sensitive period" which occurs from about 6 weeks of age to around 14 *weeks* of age. During this time they learn to socialize with other dogs, people, and other animals in their environment. Puppies also learn what is "normal and acceptable" in their environment. This is a time when many changes occur in the puppy's temperament that will last its entire life, including the development of phobias. To not provide guidance for the puppies and owners during this critical period leads to a wide variety of serious and nuisance behavior problems.

True puppy kindergarten behavior classes should be designed to appreciate that puppies will exhibit normal dog behaviors (trying to be dominant, biting, chewing, barking, digging, eliminating, etc.), which must be controlled, or directed to provide appropriate outlets. Puppies in these classes should range in age from about **9 to <16 weeks**. Just as we would not permit junior and high school aged children to attend kindergarten, no adolescents (5-10 months) dogs should be routinely permitted in a well-run puppy kindergarten class. The puppy is permitted to exhibit its normal repertoire of behaviors in a manner compatible with living in human society. For example, it may be ok to chew, but not to chew up your best athletic shoes or the corner of your chairs. Teaching a young puppy to use appropriate chew toys and helping with teething pain may be sufficient to prevent massive destruction of an owner's home in the future. Teaching a puppy to defer to humans and to inhibit its bite are other critical lessons for the young pup in its sensitive period. Going to a veterinarian and groomer would be much less traumatic if the pup learns early to allow/enjoy its entire body to be handled. Using appropriate techniques, obedience commands can be taught at a very young age, but since the puppy's attention span is short and they do not respond well to firm handling, many conventional dog trainers have waited until 4-6 months to begin training. Unfortunately, this allows the young puppy to spend its critical first few months unguided and it often learns problem behaviors such as mouthing, jumping up, barking, chewing, etc. during this time and can result in a lifelong problem of a poorly socialized dog.

Rigorous vaccine programs must be maintained by your veterinarian although disease problems in well supervised and controlled puppy classes are very rare.

Joining a good preventative puppy kindergarten class as early as 9-10 weeks of age can prevent many puppies from later losing their home. This is the most cost-effective investment you will make in the dog's behavioral life. These classes are important even if no problems are currently identified, as many behavior problems only show up later in development, but have their roots in this early social stage. If problems do occur, seek qualified help quickly to "nip them in the bud"! Although no one can guarantee exactly how a puppy will grow up behaving, using the above suggestions can help you avoid many potential behavior problems that will enhance the relationship you and your pet will share throughout its life.

For more written information on *choosing* and raising a puppy see the new book by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists: **Decoding your Dog: The Ultimate Experts Explain Common Dog Behaviors & Reveal How to Prevent or Change Unwanted Ones** <http://bit.ly/IE6Ru6>. A good book on raising a puppy is: **Perfect Puppy in Seven Days: How to Start Your Puppy Off Right** by Sophia Yin, DVM, MS.: <http://drsophiayin.com/perfectpuppy>. Also see: **The Chosen Puppy: How to Select and Raise a Puppy from an Animal Shelter**, Benjamin CL, Howell Book House, 1990.

This information is provided to you courtesy of Dr. Patrick Melese DVM, DACVB to assist you in preventing or solving your pet's behavior problem.

Please check website below and call (858) 259-6115 to schedule an appointment with the doctor.