

Ten Questions to Ask Your Dog Training Professional - Before You Hire Them!

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1. What dog training equipment do you use when training a dog or do you recommend I use?

A force-free professional trainer will recommend using equipment that has been designed with a dog's safety in mind. While collars are great for holding ID tags, they can do damage to a dog's neck and throat if the dog is walking with pressure on the leash (i.e. pulling). We recommend using a properly fitted front- or back-clipping harness to lessen the chances of damage to the dog's neck and to keep him comfortable as he learns to walk on a leash nicely without pulling. We also suggest a 6'-8' flat leash rather than a retractable leash. These give the handler much more control and help avoid injury. If a dog is prone to slipping out of a harness then we suggest double-clipping the leash to a collar as well as to the harness. This is an additional security measure.

A force-free training professional will never recommend the use of equipment that is designed to cause pain or discomfort or restrict a dog's breathing. This includes pinch/prong collars, choke/check chains, spray collars and electric/shock collars. These collars are unsafe for the dog wearing them. Both the collars and the pain they elicit may become associated with people and places in the dogs environment, a pairing that can cause a potentially dangerous behavior

2. What happens in your training program when the dog responds in the way you want him to?

Fabulous things happen to the dog when he gets it right. Fun, toys, food... Whatever the dog wants suddenly appears. A force-free trainer will say the dog gets "positively reinforced" when he does the right thing. This means the dog "gets paid" and receives something he deems of high value. Positive reinforcement should be delivered by and paired with a happy, stress-free trainer or pet owner.

3. What happens in your training program when the dog responds in the way you do not want him to?



"If you think it's expensive to hire a professional to do the job, wait until you hire an amateur" Red Adair

We believe that "bad" behavior should be ignored or redirected. If we teach our dog alternative behaviors then we can ask him to perform one of those instead of what we perceive to be inappropriate behavior. This helps the dog learn what to do and makes us feel better about our dogs. For example, when our dog jumps up on us we can either get angry with him or we can ask him to sit (which we will have previously taught him) and then reward him with our attention or a treat. It will not take long for the dog to realize that it is better to sit than to jump. This puts the onus back on us to teach our dogs the things we DO want them to do so that we can feel good about the dog and his behavior, rather than just get angry because he is not doing the right thing.

4. How will you punish the dog or advise me to punish the dog if he gets something wrong or exhibits a behavior I do not like

Very simply, we ensure we are teaching the dog age-appropriate skills and always make sure we are not expecting too much too soon. We constantly ensure we are motivating the dog correctly. If the dog has been trained and the skill is appropriate for his age but he still gets it wrong, we very briefly remove something he wants – such as treats, toys or attention - and then try again.

5. How do you ensure that my dog is not inadvertently being punished?

In a force-free training environment it would be reflected in the dog's demeanor and performance if he were being inadvertently punished. A professional force-free trainer is well-versed in canine communication and will immediately be aware of any signs that a dog is uncomfortable. A professional trainer will regroup and reassess what they are doing to create the most empowering learning environment.

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6. How do you know that the type of reinforcement you have selected to train my dog is appropriate?

A force-free professional trainer will help you determine what is the most suitable reinforcement for your dog based on what he likes, what best motivates him and how the reinforcement can best be delivered within a training environment.

Your professional force-free trainer will educate you on the different types of reinforcement and when to use them.

7. How will you know or how will I know if my dog is stressed during the training?

A professional force-free dog trainer will do everything he/she can to ensure your dog is not stressed during training sessions. Professional trainers are educated and experienced in interpreting canine communication. Dogs who are whining, growling, snarling or snapping are obviously stressed but there are also more subtle signs of stress that we also need to be on the lookout for. To do this, we watch for signs via the dog's body language.

Some of these signs of stress may be:

1. Whale eye – the whites of the eyes look like crescent moons.
2. Eyes – wide open and round rather than soft and almond shaped. Pupils may be dilated.
3. Furrowed brow.
4. Mouth is closed and the corners of the mouth (commissures) are either pulled forward into an offensive pucker or pulled back and down.
5. Panting when the temperature does not warrant it. Additionally, sweaty paw prints may be seen.
6. Ears set flat back against the head or very far forward.
7. Legs are stiff, possibly rolling forward up on toes.
8. Tail may be held high or low (possibly tucked). The wag is short and stiff and does not involve the entire rear end.
9. Neck may be extended to raise the head up high (ostrich neck).
10. Head turns away from trainer or training object.
11. Body shaking.
12. Paw lifts.
13. Lip licking or tongue flicks.
14. Sniffing the ground randomly (not on a scent trail).
15. Running away and refusing to come when called.

8. Which professional dog training associations are you a member of?

Your professional force-free dog trainer should maintain memberships only with select organizations that advocate humane, ethical training methods that are minimally aversive to animals. They should not or will not participate in any organization that promotes or endorses methods or training styles that use punishment, force, fear or intimidation.

9. Will you guarantee your training results?

A professional force-free dog trainer will not guarantee their training results. There are too many variables involved and a professional dog trainer cannot control these. Instead, your professional dog trainer will work in tandem with you to effect the most appropriate behavior change in line with your goals. The results will be dependent on many things, including your level of commitment and compliance to the recommended program.

10. How do you think a dog's behavior should be addressed if the dog is growling or snapping at people or other dogs?

An experienced force-free dog trainer will assess whether your dog is just overly aroused or has a genuine fear or aggression issue as the two can look similar. If your dog is anxious or fearful, exhibiting avoidance or acting out in an aggressive manner, then a program of desensitization and counter-conditioning (respondent learning) can be used. This type of program aims to change the dog's emotional response to stimuli that previously upset him, thus reducing the probability of him feeling the need to resort to those behaviors in the future.

Using positive reinforcement (also known as operant learning), your dog will also be taught behaviors he can have recourse to in place of the unwanted behaviors. Depending on your dog's individual circumstances, your trainer may ask you to take certain safety measures or consult with a veterinarian to rule out or address any relevant medical issues.

