

Sit, Stay, Speak!

June 14, 2011 | By Lori Mauger, CPDT-KA

How to choose the right obedience instructor for your dog.

So your new puppy is driving you crazy, or your newly adopted dog needs manners. You decide to check out some dog trainers in your area, but how do you know which one to pick? To complicate matters, you're not sure whether to take your new buddy to a group training class, or if you should hire a private trainer to come to your home. Fear not, dog lovers! Here are some guidelines to help you decide.



According to two-time American Kennel Club ([AKC](#)) National Obedience Champion [Petra Ford](#), obedience schools are a wonderful place to learn about training. She says, "Group classes offer an opportunity for owners and their dogs to hone their skills along with their peers, and classes are a great way to expose and socialize dogs to one another."

Two types of schools are available to prospective four-legged students. One type is operated by the local kennel club as a community service, and the other is a business operated by a proprietor or a corporation. If you're not sure whether there's a kennel club to choose from in your area, you can find out by performing a [club search](#) at the AKC website. In order to evaluate a training school, no matter the type, consider these several important factors.

For example, prior to signing up, **will the school allow you to visit?** Ford advises, "If you are only permitted to view a training class upon leaving a deposit, then it would be wise to consider a different school. You should feel comfortable with the class you're contemplating before you make a monetary commitment, and the only way to do so is to observe the class."

Note the staff-to-student ratio during your observation. Is there a class size limit? "Class size should be reasonable so that the instructor can assist everyone," says Ford. As far as what the class size should be, that depends on the size of the facility and the number of instructors assigned to the class. Your observation prior to signing up will give you a sense of whether the students are getting appropriate time with the instructor, especially if a question or challenge arises.

Another reason to visit a class is to **observe the instructor**. Do you feel comfortable with the instructor's style of teaching? Do you feel comfortable with the method that's being taught? Does it appear that the students in the class are making progress? There are many ways to teach a dog to perform a command, and some methods are harsher than others. If you feel uncomfortable with the technique, then go elsewhere. If you're not sure, wait until after class and ask the instructor to explain the reasoning behind the approach, and then decide if it makes sense for you and your dog.

Finally, is there a **make-up policy** in case you must miss your regularly scheduled class, and does the school have a **refund policy**? Be sure to inquire. You want to get the most from the time and money you're investing.

What if your young adult dog is particularly unruly, or you just brought your infant puppy home, and he's already a handful? Would it be better to take a

class, or to have a private trainer come to your home? The answer is: it depends.

With regard to the unruly ones, many training schools screen incoming clients to determine if their dogs are suited to a group learning environment. If the school you're planning to attend requires you to fill out a questionnaire about your dog's behavior in order to sign up for class, then answer the application honestly, and let the school decide.

If your dog is not a candidate for group training, then seek a private trainer, and be sure to let the in-home trainer know the reason for your inquiry. On the other hand, if the school you're considering does not use a screening process, you may want to call ahead and discuss your concerns.

Another option would be to find a private trainer to come to your home and evaluate your dog. Perhaps taking a few lessons at home will give you the confidence you need to work with your dog in a group setting. Or, perhaps you'll find that working with a private trainer gives you and your dog the skills you need to live in harmony -- wonderful! Mission accomplished.

So how about that whirling dervish youngster? In years past, training classes were not an option for puppies because it was believed that early exposure put young animals at high risk for contracting serious illnesses. However, in recent times, puppy classes have become the norm. Why the change? These days, most professionals agree that the health risks of early exposure are minimal when compared to the greater risk of dogs ending up homeless due to bad behavior. Nevertheless, some veterinarians and puppy owners may still feel uncomfortable with the idea of taking puppies out in public before all of their vaccinations are complete.

World-renowned veterinary behaviorist [Dr. Nicholas Dodman](#) of Tufts University, author of [The Dog Who Loved Too Much](#) and [Dogs Behaving](#)

[Badly](#), offers this advice: "Certainly, every situation is different, so owners must weigh the options and do what they believe is best for their pets, but I believe the risk of adult dogs becoming shelter statistics due to behavioral issues is far greater than the risk of young puppies becoming ill due to exposure. Early socialization provides puppies with the best opportunity to become well-adjusted pets and integral family members."

However, for those owners who decide to hold off on group classes until their puppies are older, in-home instruction is a sensible option. Working with a private trainer, even for a session or two, can put puppies on the right path to good behavior until they're ready for class.

On the other hand, suppose you'd like to attend a class, but you live too far away from one? Then don't hesitate to contact a private trainer, but be sure to find one that's right for you by inquiring about the trainer's experience and the services offered. Remember, just like the group class instructor, the private instructor should be able to explain to you his/her training methodology. You may also want to determine if the individual belongs to any professional organizations. Affiliation with peer groups is by no means a guarantee of good instruction, but it indicates that the trainer is interested in continuing education opportunities and networking.

Be certain to **ask the prospective instructor about the length of in-home visits and the fee schedule**. Private training sessions can last from one to three hours, depending on the nature of the visit. Some instructors charge by the hour, while others charge a flat per-visit fee. It's best to understand how you're being charged before the instructor arrives.

What if you need to cancel an appointment? **Find out if there's a cancellation policy**. Additionally, some instructors may offer incentives or discounts, so be sure to ask.

Finally, **what kind of support does the private instructor offer?** For example, will you receive a written summary of your lesson with a specific training plan? What if a question arises? Does the instructor provide you with follow-up telephone or email support? If so, for what period of time after the lesson -- one week, one month, one year?

It shouldn't be surprising that in-home instruction is generally costlier than group instruction. However, one benefit is the prospect that fewer lessons may be necessary to accomplish specific training goals. According to Ford, "Since you'll work one-to-one with the instructor, it's possible to accomplish more in one private lesson than would be feasible to achieve in a group. Therefore, depending on the nature of your dog's specific training needs, and assuming that you're an owner who's committed to practicing with your dog regularly, you may be able to realize your objective with fewer training sessions. However, understand that dogs with complex behavioral issues may require ongoing instruction."

Another advantage to private training is that **lessons can be customized to your specific needs**. For example, suppose you contact a trainer for an in-home lesson because your adolescent dog is mouthy, a common challenge with some young dogs, especially when they're teething. When the trainer arrives and observes the dog, though, it's apparent to him or her that your dog may actually be developing a resource-guarding behavior (the overzealous coveting of food or other desired items), a behavior that you thought was part of growing up and would simply go away when your dog matured, but is actually something that would likely become more challenging with time. Training in the home setting enables the instructor to pick up on the nuances of your dog's demeanor and thereby provide you with great insight into your dog's needs. It also helps you to better understand and apply the training protocol that the instructor devises.

As you can see, the dog training journey you are about to embark upon has options. Happily, you've already made the most important decision -- you recognize that formal training is the key to a long-lasting relationship with your best friend. Now get out there and train!

Note: When searching for a group class or a private trainer, you may want to consider whether the instructor is a member of a professional organization, and additionally whether he/she is certified or endorsed by one or more of those organizations.

Dog training is an unregulated profession. In other words, anyone can say they are a trainer. Professional organizations are trying to bridge that gap by providing certification opportunities and continuing education for their members. For further information, check out the following links:

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- [Association of Pet Dog Trainers](#)
- [Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers](#)
- [National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors](#)
- [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#)
- [International Association of Canine Professionals](#)

One caveat with regard to professional memberships, though. Training classes organized by local kennel clubs are usually taught by members who volunteer their time on behalf of their club and their community. Therefore, volunteer instructors may or may not participate in the professional organizations mentioned above.