



## Oh, Behave!

When your pet seems to have lost a few marbles, whom do you turn to?

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**By the time Victoria Swana** returned home from a morning run last June, a minor catastrophe had struck. Wood shards covered the kitchen floor by the door to the garage, and her shar-pei was lying on the doormat, licking her bloody paws.

Swana rushed to Ladybug's side to assess the damage. The 7-year-old pooch had scratched the door so hard that she had almost dug out her nail beds.

After cleaning Ladybug's wounds, Swana left for a meeting. "I thought this was just a freak thing, but when I got back, same show," says the Easthampton, Mass., lawyer. And another episode came later that week. "So we went from leaving

her alone with no problem to 'my dog has freaked out overnight.'"

As pet owners know, animal behavior can be confounding. There are dogs who bark incessantly, cats who hide, and unruly hounds who jump on people. There are biters, compulsive self-groomers, house soilers, and pets who panic when left alone. While some behaviors are merely annoying, others can impact the animals'—and their owners'—quality of life.

Sadly, many people simply banish their troubled companion to the backyard or surrender him to a shelter. But most behavior problems are solvable, says Adam Goldfarb, director of The HSUS's Pets at Risk program, and that's where the experts

come in.

In recent years, the pet behavior modification business has steadily grown, and people with a variety of academic backgrounds and training have found careers in the field. Because credentials vary, there's no hard-and-fast rule about which type of expert can resolve your pet's problem. For basic manners, a reputable trainer can likely help. More serious or mysterious behavior issues might warrant a visit to a veterinary behaviorist or certified applied animal behaviorist.

For most problem behaviors, you should first take your pet for a complete veterinary exam. "Pain is a powerful stressor," says associate certified applied animal behaviorist Heather Mohan-Gibbons of Ojai, Calif. "So if [I see] something like compulsive licking or sudden aggression, right away I'm thinking medical problem."

After Swana's veterinarian cleared Ladybug of any health problems, he referred the pooch to the nearby Tufts Animal Behavior Clinic, where veterinary behaviorist Nicholas Dodman diagnosed the dog with noise phobia—likely the result of new construction in her neighborhood. Swana left with anxiety medication and instructions for creating a doggie haven where Ladybug could retreat from loud sounds. In time, Ladybug was back to normal.

Of course, not everyone lives near an animal behavior clinic, but qualified experts can be found in most regions. Veterinarians and pet-loving friends are good resources for recommendations. When screening potential experts, ask about experience treating similar issues, check references and resumés, and "be very wary of anyone who is quick to mention shock collars, choke chains, and the outdated training methods that stress alpha roles, domination, and pack mentality," says Goldfarb.

Keep in mind that "trainer," "pet counselor," "behavior consultant," and similar generic titles aren't regulated and don't guarantee a certain level of competence. Understanding the differences among animal behavior professionals can help you make an informed choice.

# Who's Got Cred?

When evaluating behavior professionals, you'll likely encounter experts with a variety of certifications and degrees. Here's some help navigating the alphabet soup—and finding the right person for your pet's issues.

## **DOCTOR OF VETERINARY MEDICINE, DVM (OR VETERINARY MEDICAL DOCTOR, VMD)**

- ▶ Has completed a four-year doctoral program and passed a national board examination
- ▶ May also be board-certified in one or more specialties
- ▶ Can diagnose behavior-related health problems and prescribe medications

While animal behavior studies aren't required to earn a veterinary degree, some veterinarians, such as members of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, have a special interest in behavior issues and can develop treatment plans. If not, they typically refer troubled pets to a qualified professional.

Although his main job is managing pets' medical issues, veterinarian Kevin Fitzgerald of Denver, Colo., reads professional journals and attends conferences related to animal behavior. "People with pets exhibiting problem behavior often need a quick answer," he says. Otherwise, a pet's position in the home may be compromised. Fitzgerald has been able to help resolve issues related to aggression, nuisance barking, separation anxiety, and even coprophagy—feces consumption. When a problem is beyond his expertise, he refers clients to a veterinary behaviorist or certified applied animal behaviorist.

## **DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY BEHAVIORISTS, DACVB**

- ▶ Has received DVM education and completed a residency in animal behavior, conducted behavior-related research, and passed the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists exam
- ▶ Can diagnose behavior-related health problems and prescribe medications

Board-certified veterinary behaviorists are licensed veterinarians who specialize in issues such as aggression, separation anxiety, phobias, and compulsions and can treat underlying medical conditions.

To resolve a behavior issue, veterinary behaviorist Marsha Reich of Silver Spring, Md., examines the animal's medical records, gives the owner a detailed questionnaire, and spends hours assessing the pet in his home environment. "It's the whole approach," she says, "... going through and looking at everything that could possibly be contributing to what is going on and then what can I do to achieve the behavior I want."

## **CERTIFIED APPLIED ANIMAL BEHAVIORIST (CAAB) AND ASSOCIATE CERTIFIED APPLIED ANIMAL BEHAVIORIST (ACAAB)**

- ▶ Typically has an undergraduate degree in biology or psychology and a doctoral degree (CAAB) or master's degree (ACAAB) in animal behavior science

## ▶ Is certified through the Animal Behavior Society

CAABs and ACAABs are analogous to human psychologists but with expertise in animal behavior problems. They often work in tandem with clients' veterinarians when medications are needed.

ACAAB Heather Mohan-Gibbons has treated dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, rats, and even a biting potbellied pig. Her most common clients are dogs with aggression or separation anxiety issues and cats who are fearful or not using a litter box. Her education and training enable her to "look at a behavior and break it apart into the smallest possible components to identify ... why the behavior may be happening," she says. She recommends choosing a behavior professional who understands learning theory and is committed to continuing education. "It is important to stay current as the field continues to progress."

## **TRAINERS AND BEHAVIOR CONSULTANTS**

- ▶ Have varying levels of expertise; while this category includes many highly skilled professionals, no official regulations or licensure requirements govern use of generic titles such as "trainer" and "pet behaviorist"
- ▶ Backgrounds often include a mix of formal education, hands-on workshops, apprenticeships, and self-study
- ▶ Certifying organizations and schools include the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers, International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants, Animal Behavior College, Karen Pryor Academy, and others

While most trainers focus on obedience skills—such as coming when called and not jumping on people—some can handle more complicated cases. "A good trainer will be honest about whether or not your pet has an issue that they feel comfortable handling," says The HSUS's Adam Goldfarb.

Trainers and behavior consultants typically work with pets in the home or group classes. Before enrolling your pooch in a class, certified professional dog trainer Colleen Pelar of Woodbridge, Va., recommends observing the trainer in action: "Are the people having fun? Are the dogs having fun?" Good trainers, she says, need to be skilled communicators, since much of their work is teaching owners how to implement a training and behavior modification program in the home. One resource for locating dog trainers in your area is the online directory of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers ([apdt.com](http://apdt.com)).

