

# When the Helpline Can't Help

By Sherry Woodard

If you have contacted an animal behavior helpline about your pet's problem behavior, and the helpline hasn't helped, there are a few other options to consider. You could consult with a traditional or a holistic veterinarian, a pet trainer, a behavior counselor, a certified applied animal behaviorist, or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist.

How do you decide which professional to use? You should always start by taking your pet to a traditional veterinarian to determine if the behavior has a medical cause. Once that is ruled out, you could hire a trainer to see if the behavior can be altered with some simple training techniques. If the problem persists, you should try a behavior counselor, a certified applied animal behaviorist, or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist, depending on how severe the problem is and what types of professional are available in your area.

Whoever you decide to work with, please be aware that changing the problem behavior will take time and patience on your part. You will need to work on the behavior at home with your pet, following the recommendations of the trainer, counselor or behaviorist. The professional needs to train *you*, as well as your pet, so you know how to reinforce the behavior that you want.

Below is an explanation of the function of each of these professionals:

## Pet Trainer

A trainer can help you discourage unwanted behavior in your pet and encourage desirable behavior. They teach the basics: house-training, crate training, and correcting behaviors like digging, barking, chewing, and pulling on lead. Trainers generally don't have medical knowledge or enough expertise to deal with severe behavior problems, but they are the least expensive option among the behavior professionals.

Anyone can claim to be a trainer, so ask questions like the following if you're thinking about hiring someone:

- **How were you trained?** (Look for someone who has had life experience, someone who has been around animals, not just taken classes. If the person has trained different types of animals, so much the better. Ask about formal training, but keep in mind that many good trainers are self-taught through experience. Also, the best trainers keep themselves well-informed about new training methods and theories.)



- **How much experience do you have?** (The trainer should have at least six months of experience. Anything less and the person may not know how to work with problem behavior in a calm, confident manner. Animals can sense a lack of confidence, and the training will be less successful as a result.)
- **What types of animals have you trained?** (Some trainers work with a variety of animals and some only work with one type. It's most desirable for the trainer to have had experience working with a wide variety of animals, since you learn something different from training each type of animal.)
- **Are you certified through a national certification program?** (This applies mainly to dog trainers, since there are no national certification programs for those who train house cats, rabbits, etc.)

You might also want to visit during one of the trainer's sessions to see the style, techniques and tools being used. If the trainer does anything that you are uncomfortable with, keep looking. You want to find a trainer who uses humane training methods – someone who will give you and your pet a positive experience.

You can find a certified dog trainer through [www.ccpdt.org](http://www.ccpdt.org), the website for the Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers. Click on "CPDT Roster" to get a list of certified dog trainers by state. If you are told by a trainer that he or she is not qualified for your case, ask for a referral to a behavior counselor or animal behaviorist.

## Behavior Specialists

There are three different types of specialists who deal with animal behavior problems:

**Behavior counselor.** A behavior counselor is often a certified pet trainer, but he or she should also have more experience and knowledge, including a background in learning theory, awareness of the latest scientific knowledge, and hands-on training. A behavior counselor should be able to analyze and diagnose the problem, devise and explain a possible solution, and do necessary follow-up. Like trainers, some counselors are species-specific.

There is no certification for behavior counselors, but you can ask your veterinarian for a recommendation. Behavior counselors are generally listed in the Yellow Pages as trainers who work on behavioral issues.

**Certified applied animal behaviorist.** These are people who have been certified by the Animal Behavior Society (ABS) as either an applied or an associate applied animal behaviorist. Certification by ABS means that an individual meets certain educational, experiential and ethical standards required by the society. For help in finding a certified animal behaviorist, click on "CAAB Directory" on the Animal Behavior Society website at [www.animalbehavior.org](http://www.animalbehavior.org).

**Board-certified veterinary behaviorist.** A veterinary behaviorist is a veterinarian who has completed an approved residency training program in veterinary animal behavior and passed a board exam. Veterinary behaviorists can rule out health problems and dispense medications, which are sometimes used to help change behavior in pets. You

can think of animal behaviorists as the equivalent of psychologists, while veterinary behaviorists are the equivalent of psychiatrists. For help in finding a board-certified veterinary behaviorist, talk to your veterinarian.

## Veterinarians

**Traditional veterinarian.** There are many vets who are not certified as veterinary behaviorists, but they have a special interest in veterinary behavior and promote behavioral medicine in their practice. Ask your vet how much experience she or he has had with solving animal behavior problems. If your vet has limited experience, ask for a referral.

**Holistic veterinarian.** A holistic vet uses alternative means for diagnosing and treating health problems and, sometimes, behavioral problems. As with traditional vets, experience will vary, so you will need to talk to them about what they can offer. For help in finding a holistic veterinarian, visit the website for the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association at [www.ahvma.org](http://www.ahvma.org).

## Recommended Reading

If you want to learn more about cat behavior, we recommend the following books:

- *The Cat Who Cried for Help* by Dr. Nicholas Dodman. Using examples from his own practice, Dodman (a veterinary behaviorist) intelligently and humorously talks about symptoms, treatment options, and helpful tips for prevention.
- *Think Like a Cat* by Pam Johnson-Bennett. A feline behaviorist provides excellent insight into cat behavior and gives helpful tips for stopping problem behaviors like destructive chewing, aggression, furniture scratching, and litter-box difficulties.

If you want to learn more about dog behavior, we recommend the following books:

- *The Dog Who Loved Too Much* by Dr. Nicholas Dodman. Using examples from his own practice, Dodman intelligently and humorously talks about symptoms, treatment options, and helpful tips for prevention.
- *Final Hope* by Stephen Joubert. This book offers a comprehensive approach to dealing with an aggressive dog. It has a helpful section on finding a professional to work with.

*Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.*