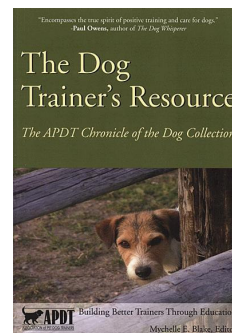


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## ***Are You Ready to Take on Behavioral Cases?***

*by Pia Silvani, CPDT*

Before you put your reputation on the line, think twice about taking on behavioral cases—the dog's life and relationship with the owner could be at stake.

No matter how simple the case may appear, there is usually no quick, easy solution to most behavior problems. Owners typically do not seek help until they are frustrated, concerned, and at their wit's end. They may have exhausted all other avenues—nothing has worked. You get the call! You might be the dog's last chance.

Knowing this should not put pressure on you to take the case, however, one of the universally recognized principles in professional practices is that it is difficult to know what you do not know.

### **Self-Evaluation**

Consider a self-evaluation:

- "Can I adequately handle the case?"
- "Am I ready?"

Some things to think about:

**1) Knowledge?** Evaluate how much time you have spent educating yourself through reading, attending lectures, and mentoring under experts. A few quick reads and attending a seminar here and there is not sufficient.

**2) Communication?** When you take on behavioral cases, you become a translator, or go-between, for two different species who desire to live harmoniously together. Can you be effective? You will need to find a common ground so they can tell each other their needs, desires, and limitations. To effectively accomplish this both dog and owner must find you trustworthy. You will be asked questions far beyond the arena of dog training. Can you clearly identify the scope of your role?

**3) Competence?** Are you prepared to take a history, knowing exactly what questions to ask to help determine what is causing the problem? Prepare a detailed history sheet, including a liability waiver, and make sure you have adequate liability insurance. Plan on developing a systematic way of extrapolating information from the client without making them feel unworthy. Can you get information without the client becoming defensive? Are you fully familiar with the

possible triggers that might be involved in the particular case? Can you be well balanced in your thinking and sustain a professional relationship with the client, regardless of how you feel? These owners are counting on success, no matter how difficult the problem may be. The wrong advice can backfire, causing the owner to be upset and making you legally liable as a result.

**4) Ethical Beliefs?** There are two important considerations here:

- Do you understand the difference between punishment, discipline, and abuse?
- There are various forms of punishment that are non-aversive and effective. On the other hand, there may be times when positive punishment is necessary. If this is your choice, are you fully familiar with the limitations, risks, and benefits of using punishment to effectively implement a treatment program in a humane and effective manner? You must be familiar with what influences the effectiveness of a consequence, or it can cause more harm than good.

**5) Success?** Can you resolve the problem and make recommendations that will help treat the underlying cause as opposed to treating the symptoms? If a client called regarding house soiling, is a crate always recommended as your first option? What if the soiling was a result of separation anxiety and the owners took your advice only to find a bloody dog when they returned?

**6) Honesty?** What if the situation becomes much more than you had anticipated? Can you be honest? Can you be truthful and fair to the dog and owner? You will receive more respect by being honest than by misleading the client about your abilities. Let the client know you cannot go beyond your scope of practice, while assuring them that you will continue to provide them good services by directing them to someone with "different specialties." You can teach the value of training while providing support and education.

### **Taking on the Case**

Since you will be paid for this service, do not spend an hour on the telephone giving advice and getting information. Compare behavior problems with a chronic illness: you would not diagnose or troubleshoot a serious condition over the phone. There is much to see and know before making conclusions.

**1) Pre-Visit.** Explain to the clients in advance:

- Cost of session;
- Length of session (one to two hours depending upon the complexity of the case);
- What the visit entails:
  - Getting a history;
  - Learning about the dog's background;
  - Household environment and influences;
  - Family dynamics;
  - A verbal and written summary;
  - Giving options to help resolve the matter.
- You will *not* be training the dog; and
- *No guarantees.* We cannot guarantee our own behavior, never mind the behavior of a dog.

**2) Professional Etiquette:**

- Be prompt. Your time and your client's time is valuable.
- Dress for success—neat and clean. You only have one chance to make a first impression.
- Establish rapport—be approachable, courteous, attentive, and friendly.
- Refrain from making disparaging remarks about other animal care professionals—they could have been your referral or a source of future business.

**3) Avoid Distractions.** Give the client your undivided attention and avoid disruptions. Try to make in-home appointments during school hours unless you need to see the dog and child(ren) interact.

**4) Avoid Being Judgmental.** Be sympathetic to their problem, no matter how you feel. If you do not have patience and do not enjoy working with people, then you should probably not be involved in behavioral work. The more understanding, compassionate, and caring you can be, the more the client will open up. If you come across as insensitive, the client may develop the same attitude.

**5) Stay Focused.** Keep the client focused and on track. Ignore the “yes, but” client since it is unrealistic to expect a pet owner to share your understanding of why the dog is behaving the way he is and how to resolve it. Clients are very often releasing some of their anxiety. They feel responsible, guilty, angry, ashamed, embarrassed, frustrated, and/or anxious about the future. You are there to support and help them find a way to improve the relationship and resolve the problem.

**6) Observation Flags:**

- Relationship between dog and owner;
- Behavior of dog to owner;
- Behavior of owner to dog;

- Dog's behavior and reaction to you and the environment;
- Family dynamics;
- Early background and reinforcement history.
- Does the owner want to really change the behavior (including both owners?)
- What are they looking for you to tell them?
- What are the most important things for the client to accomplish? Can you satisfy their needs and wants? What is a want? What is a need?

See book for complete text.

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) is a professional organization of individual trainers who are committed to becoming better trainers through education.

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