

Selecting a Behavior Consultant

What is a Behavior Consultant? A Behavior Consultant is person who assists pet owners with their pet's behavior problems and can include a wide range of professionals. Behavior consultant is a general term that can be used by animal trainers, veterinarians, veterinary behaviorists, or others without specific training qualifications. **Since "behavior consultant" is not a protected term, the title can be used by anyone regardless of their training, education or background. There are no governing bodies that monitor, require licensing, or certification for anyone using the term Behavior Consultant.**

This means that it is important to do your homework before engaging the services of a particular individual. Ask the person questions to understand their education, training, and qualifications to help you with your pet's behavior.

What about the term Behaviorist? This term also does not indicate any specific qualification or level of schooling unless preceded by "**veterinary**" or "**applied animal**" in which case there are guidelines for the use of the term. A person without any formal training and/or education in animal behavior can call themselves a behaviorist unless they are a veterinarian. Veterinarians are not legally allowed to call themselves specialists unless board-certified by a particular specialty college. For behavior, this is the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

What do the initials after a person's name indicate about their training?

DACVB – Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists: This is a veterinarian who has completed a 2 to 3-year residency program at an accredited veterinary college or in a non- conforming training program. Residents are required to see over 400 supervised behavior cases, write three peer reviewed case reports, author and publish a scientific paper based on their own research, and pass a rigorous board exam. Because of their in-depth training in veterinary medicine and animal behavior, these professionals are in a unique position to be able to assess and diagnose medical causes of behavioral concerns as well as create treatment programs that include behavior modification, environmental management, and if appropriate, prescribe medication. To find a DAVCB in your area, use the search function on the DACVB website: <https://www.dacvb.org/search/>

CAAB - Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist: CAABs come from a variety of different backgrounds. Certification requirements include a doctoral degree (PhD) in a biological or behavioral science with an emphasis on animal behavior and five years of professional experience in applied animal behavior or a veterinary degree with two years of a residency and three years of experience in applied animal behavior. To apply for certification through the Animal Behavior Society (ABS), the professional must demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the literature, scientific principles, and principles of animal behavior as well as demonstrate contributions to the scientific (research) understanding of animal behavior. Applied animal behaviorists use behavior and learning theory to evaluate behavior and design interventions utilizing behavior modification to resolve or reduce the problem behavior. To find a CAAB in your area, visit the CAAB directory on the ABS website:

<https://www.animalbehaviorsociety.org/web/applied-behavior-caab-directory.php>

Note: The CAAB directory also lists associate certified applied animal behavior consultants (ACAAB). The guidelines for certification for an associate can be found at

<https://www.animalbehaviorsociety.org/web/applied-behavior-caab-application.php>

DVM or VMD – Doctor of Veterinary Medicine or Veterinariae Medicinae Doctoris: A veterinarian receives training on the medical health of a wide variety of animals. There are national licensing standards and guidelines that dictate a standard of care for veterinary care. Veterinarians are the only behavior consultant professionals legally eligible to diagnose behavior problems and prescribe medications for behavioral health concerns. Many medical concerns may affect your pet's behavior so a physical exam and discussion of your concerns with your pet's veterinarian is the first step in treating any behavior problem. They may recommend further diagnostic tests to help identify medical concerns or referral to a professional with behavioral expertise. Veterinarians have an ethical obligation to refer you to qualified professional if your case is beyond their expertise. Veterinarians with an interest in behavior may not have additional certifications or may have certifications such as Fear Free (<https://fearfreepets.com/>) or a Low Stress Handling Certificate (<https://lowstresshandling.com/>).

IAABC – International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: IAABC is a certifying organization which includes professionals from many different professions. The requirements to be certified include 500 hours of consulting experience, three case studies, and completion of questions regarding terminology, assessment, history taking, and a clinical scenario. Some consultants are also certified at an associate level of certification requiring 300 hours of consulting experience. IAABC members agree to a Code of Ethics upon certification that they will work to minimize the use of aversive stimuli and maximize the effective use of reinforcers to modify animal behavior adhering to LIMA (least intrusive, minimally aversive) principles. Within this framework some behavior consultants may use aversive training techniques so it is important to discuss and understand the professional's personal training philosophy and techniques before proceeding to work with an IAABC consultant. To find an IAABC certified behavior consultant in your area, visit the IAABC directory: <https://m.iaabc.org/consultant/>

Where does AVSAB fit into finding a behavior consultant?

Due to the limited availability of DACVBs and CAABs in many areas of the country, many owners interested in pursuing a behavior consultation with a professional with advanced training need a source of alternative options.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) is a group of veterinarians and doctorate level animal behaviorists dedicated to improving the lives of animals and people through an understanding of animal behavior. AVSAB does not certify or govern its members so there can be a variety of expertise, education, and training. However, veterinarians are licensed by the state in which they practice and have an ethical obligation to refer you to qualified professional if your case is beyond their expertise. To be included in the behavior consultant directory members must pledge that they have read and agree to adhere to the recommendations and guidelines established in the AVSAB position statements and will promote both the understanding of animal behavior and the solving of behavior problems by applying current scientifically and humanely based techniques. AVSAB's position statements can be found here: <https://avsab.org/resources/position-statements/>

To find an AVSAB member in your area who has elected to be a part of our behavior consultant directory, visit the AVSAB website: <https://avsab.org/animal-behavior-consultant-directory-search/>

Tips for Finding the Right Behavior Consultant:

Research information on their website, or social media, and/or email or call them directly with questions.

What questions should I ask the professional I am considering working with?

1. What is their philosophy regarding animal behavior problems and behavior modification?
2. How will they teach your pet new behaviors and how do they address unwanted behaviors?
3. What tools do they use (collars, leashes, etc.) in training and behavior modification? (*Note that videos and pictures on websites can be useful to identify tools and techniques used but should be confirmed with the professional.*)
4. What credentials or certifications does the individual possess?
5. What types of continuing education have they completed and how do they keep up-to-date on behavior topics?
6. Who do they refer to if the case is outside of their behavioral expertise or the case is not progressing as expected?

Checklist to help you decide if this is the right behavior consultant for your pet

Go signs

- ✓ Professional is able to give specific details on methods they will use for behavior modification.
- ✓ The behavior modification and treatment approaches fit with AVSAB position statements on punishment, dominance theory, puppy socialization including:
 - Avoidance of aversive training methods such as electronic training collars (shock collar), choke collars and prong collars.
 - Reward-based training methods are used to alter behavior
 - Utilize methods that improve human animal beyond
- ✓ Recent and ongoing continuing education in animal behavior
- ✓ Has a professional working relationship with a boarded veterinary behaviorist or CAAB to refer cases when needed.

Stop signs

- ☐ Unable or unwilling to define what techniques they will use to modify your pet's behavior. This includes vague answers such as using a "balanced" training plan or "whatever works for your pet" versus giving you specific examples.
- ☐ Use of behavior modification and treatment approaches that do not fit with current AVSAB position statements including:
 - Use punitive or aversive training methods such as electronic training collars (shock collar), choke collars and prong collars.
 - Focus is on you being a dominant, strong and/or pack leader for your pet.
 - Avoid or discourage use of food as a reward for your pet.
- ☐ Guarantees that they can fix any behavior problem. Professionals can guarantee their service but should not guarantee a specific outcome.
- ☐ Unable to tell you to whom they refer to or work with when cases that are not progressing or above their expertise.