

Where can I find an obedience trainer?

By Michelle Heald

This is a question that is often asked and there are many avenues to explore when trying to find a qualified dog-obedience instructor. We realise that there are many people who don't like the term 'obedience' training but for the sake of this article it's what we're going to use. Basic obedience means that your dog understands basic commands like 'sit', 'stay', comes on the recall and walks to the heel-beside you without pulling or straining at the lead. Many trainers will also stress the importance of teaching your dog to sit and stay at curbs until you give the okay to cross the road. This skill is critical if your walks take in busy urban streets and are handy when crossing quieter suburban streets.

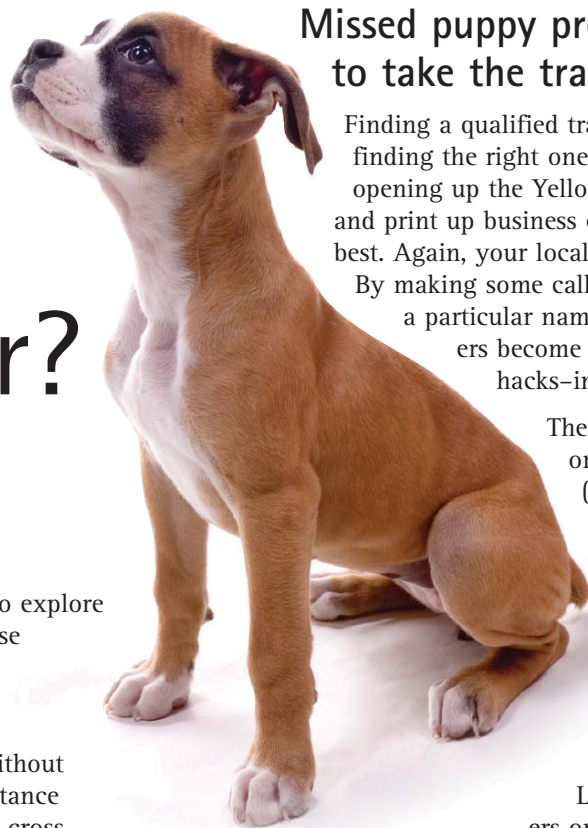
Puppy Pre-school 101

Making an early start on obedience and basic training is an excellent idea. These days most veterinary clinics and pet shops can point you in the direction of a good 'Puppy pre-school' program. Many Sydney vet clinics also offer their own regular courses and are happy to discuss the basic training and topics covered.

Puppy pre-school courses generally run over a period of four weeks and last an hour each class. These courses are an excellent opportunity for puppies to meet other puppies and acquire all-important social skills. Basic 'manners' are taught such as 'sit', 'stay', 'come', 'drop' and how to walk nicely on a lead. It's also a great opportunity for new puppy owners to ask questions on problems they're having with toilet training or raise other concerns such as digging, chewing and basic pup-etiquette.

Questions to ask a prospective puppy pre-school would be

- how long the course runs for and the duration of the sessions
- do they have a limit on how many puppies can attend
- where should your puppy be up to in her vaccinations (generally puppy should have at least had its 6-8 week vaccination) and is it a requirement that all other puppies attending be vaccinated
- costs involved—prices throughout the Sydney region can vary from anywhere from \$80 to \$160 for a four week course but many of the more pricey courses have a maximum of only six pups. Smaller classes mean that you'll get more individualised attention and opportunity to ask important questions.
- can you pay as you go or are you expected to commit and pay in advance
- times the courses run—most are conveniently timed in the evenings for busy working people



Missed puppy pre-school or perhaps you want to take the training further?

Finding a qualified trainer for your more mature dog isn't hard, but finding the right one in your area can be tricky. Sure, you can start by opening up the Yellow Pages but remember that anyone can run an ad and print up business cards. Word of mouth and recommendations are best. Again, your local veterinary clinic could be the first place to look. By making some calls around your local area you'll soon see whether a particular name is mentioned time and time again. Good trainers become known by good veterinarians and they'll avoid hacks—inexperienced and unproven individuals.

There are also professional or membership based organisations that can refer you. The Delta Society (www.deltasocietyaustralia.com.au) has a training program for instructors which is done at a Certificate IV program level recognised as qualifications by the industry. And the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.apdt.com.au) is a membership based group which has a code of ethics as well as a member directory on site as does the Delta Society.

Local welfare shelters may also recommend trainers or know of quality courses. Groomers, pet sitters, professional dog walkers and boarding kennels are also a good source to ask for word of mouth recommendations. Perhaps you've seen an exceptionally well-behaved dog in your neighbourhood so why not chase that dog person down the street and ask them. Many people will be happy to brag about the training their dog received and their experiences.

In the end however, it's about a relationship between the dog and trainer and also whether or not you follow the training of your dog with your own. It's senseless to engage a dog trainer if you don't follow the lead.

After locating a good trainer or training course it's time to check them out and determine whether the training methods are right for you and your pooch. Many will require you to be part of the training process and this should be encouraged. Basic training will ensure both you and your dog are trained and help reinforce the bond between you. There are 'training camps' where you can send your dog away but these can deliver variable results and as the dog's main handler, you should be part of the training process.

If the trainer offers group classes, ask whether you can sit in and observe one. If the trainer says no, then that should be a warning to you that perhaps this isn't the course for you. Reputable trainers welcome interested potential clients and should be happy for you to evaluate whether this is the right training course and what the training experience will be like.

Take this evaluation time to leave your training buddy (dog) at home, this way you'll be less distracted. Watch the instructor/s—are they having fun and do they have a good rapport with their students—human and doggy. Is there plenty of positive encouragement given to the students? What about the techniques used? If the techniques appear harsh or rough then you shouldn't sign up. If trainers are hitting, kneeling, barking commands in a mean way then you definitely should not consider these training methods.

Having a well-behaved dog is important and requires commitment, but the experience should be fun and enjoyable. Certainly your dog will respond better if she's having a tail-wagging, good time with the encouragement of kindly words and tempting treats.

Does the instructor have a 'demo dog'. This would generally be their dog where they're able to properly demonstrate training methods. Is this the model dog that behaves well and on command. Would you like your dog to be just like the instructor's dog? If all of this appeals to you, then you've found the trainer or course that'll be right for you and your dog.

Perhaps group classes aren't available or aren't for you

This is where you have to decide whether you undertake individualised training or perhaps your dog has 'behavioural issues' that you need to seek advice for and work on. Questions to ask a trainer who deals with behavioural issues should include:

- how long have you been a trainer and what qualifications do you have
- can we train in my local area in familiar territory or should we train in a 'neutral' or unfamiliar park
- where did you learn to train dogs and can you explain the methods commonly used
- will you do an individualised program for us
- can other family members be involved
- do you have any clients that would be happy to tell me about your methods and their experiences (this could be tricky due to privacy reasons but most trainers would have clients happy to talk to you)
- is my problem/s something you commonly see and work on

Remember to trust your intuition and make a strong commitment to be consistent with training. Having a daily routine in maintaining the training is important. Good manners need to be worked on even if you've got a headache, trying to leave the house, getting home after a busy day or feel you're too tired to tackle that little naughty or annoying habit your dog has developed.

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