

What Does it Mean to “Advocate for Your Dog?”

It's great to hear that this concept is being heard more and is becoming mainstream – but what does it mean?

“Advocating” means that you are prioritizing your dog's needs in a given situation, and proactively managing a situation to coordinate and meet both your dog's needs and your goals. This sounds simple enough, but it can be complicated! For the purposes of this column, we're focusing on needs and goals relating to training and behaviour, but this is certainly applicable to all other situations.

Understanding your dog's needs is paramount, and this takes a lot of learning on your part. You can't advocate for your dog's needs if you don't have a clear idea of what those needs are or the best route to accommodating them. This is an educational component that requires a willingness to learn and potentially change your views or approaches by seeking out solid resources. The catch is that you need guidance to facilitate your education... but you need the education to facilitate finding a guide! Reading through past issues of this column on our [web site](#) is a great place to start.

When you have some clarity as to your dog's needs, the next step is to research service providers - be that a trainer, a vet, a groomer, or another professional. There is, unfortunately, very little oversight of acceptable approaches to training or behaviour in most animal industries, and in many cases “anything goes.” Your first step might be to investigate the professional's credentials. Do they belong to organizations or have certifications? If so, research those organizations and determine if they promote training methods that match your own values. Do they include names of trainers or mentors they have taken courses with, and can you find out more about these mentors? What do they share on their business' social media accounts? In many cases, you can find out a lot about what type of equipment is likely to be used if you know what to look for in pictures and video. Be aware that language used on websites is often heavily influenced by marketing or what they think a consumer wants to hear. For example, “positive reinforcement” has a specific definition, but is very often used in a way that misrepresents the training techniques that are actually employed.

Once you find a professional you're comfortable with, reach out to them and ask questions. Trainer and behaviour consultant Jean Donaldson created a consumer protection campaign with the goal of helping pet owners cut through the vague marketing language that has become so popular in training in recent years. She instructs pet owners to query their choice of trainer the following three questions:

- What exactly will happen to my dog when she gets it right?
- What exactly will happen to her when she gets it wrong?
- Are there any less invasive alternatives to what you propose?

You can read more on this at [Eileen Anderson's blog](#).

If you're comfortable with the answers provided, congratulations on finding your trainer! Having found someone you trust, it's now a matter of negotiating the day-to-day details throughout each training class. For example, if you're in a group class with a hyper-social puppy, ask to have a visual barrier put up so your pup isn't overwhelmed by the activity in the room. Likewise, that

hyper-social puppy may not be a good choice as a class demo dog, so you can ask to take a spot in the room away from the demonstration area. If these accommodations aren't immediately available upon entry into the classroom, just remind your instructor rather than assuming that they are not willing to make the accommodation for you.

When you're working with a trusted service provider, there needs to be clear communication and give and take in the relationship. Advocacy doesn't mean getting exactly what you want exactly when you want it. For example, if you ask for accommodations in a group class for your reactive dog and these are not, in the eyes of the trainer, reasonable for a group class, you will need to be flexible in having your needs met through private training instead of a group class. Mutual understanding and respect are critical in finding the middle ground. You know your dog best, and your trainer knows dogs best.

There can be situations in which, despite best efforts, you need to find a new service provider. Sometimes there will be a matter of mismatch between what you understood in discussion and what's available to you, and sometimes it will simply be a matter of finding a better personality match between you and the professional. Simply start the process again to find a service provider who is a better fit with you, and your dog's, needs.

Advocacy is key in finding your ideal fit of service provider and making best use of your training sessions. Being clear and kind in your communication will reap the best rewards for your advocacy efforts, both for your own learning and your dog's progress and well-being.



Emily Fisher is a Certified Dog Behaviour Consultant through the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants (IAABC), and a Certified Professional Dog Trainer through the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT).