

Pet Training: Fast, Cheap or Good

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My brother has a sign in his office that reads, "You can have it fast, cheap or good -- select any two of the above!" The implication of this advice is simple. In order to get quality you must be willing to accept certain tradeoffs. In the world of dog training, this rule is especially true.

According to recent studies, 75% of animals surrendered to animal shelters are taken there because of unacceptable behavior. Many pet owners realize the necessity of adding behavioral structure to their pets' lives. Merely deciding to provide your pet with training often requires more than a brief look through the yellow pages. To give your animal adequate training you must be an informed consumer.

Your first decision about training should be to decide on private or group instruction. Group instruction is an inexpensive way to teach your pet the basics of polite behavior. Most classes are held in public places and offer your pet the chance to perform in the presence of various distractions. The opportunity to socialize a pet is often a major advantage to group instruction -- and may also be a liability. While many pets adapt quickly to the presence of other dogs, some are incapable of learning while trying to ignore major distractions. The biggest drawback to classes is that they are limited in their ability to give individual attention. If you or your dog need special handling you may not be able to get it from a class. The average cost of a class is \$50 for eight weekly sessions and may run as high as \$100, or more. Group instruction may vary from just a few students to more than 20. This type of training is often sponsored by municipal parks departments.

Private obedience training offers a different set of options. The primary advantage of private training is that it allows you to learn at a rate geared to you and your dog. Many of the most common behavior complaints are not covered by groups but are the focus of private instruction. Another advantage of private instruction is that it is often conducted in your home. The average fee is about \$400, but can range from \$200 to \$2000 or more.

While the total price of private training appears much higher than group classes, the actual rate may be closer than you think. A class of ten pupils will each get about 1/10th of the instructor's time, or about 48 minutes of private instruction over a typical eight week course.

While the \$50 fee looked cheap compared to the private training, it really was not. Your 48 minutes of individual attention cost you \$57 per hour - about the same rate as the private instructor. The other seven hours may be spent watching someone else get help, or falling behind because your dog is distracted by other dogs. On top of that, the group instructor got a total of \$500 for eight hours of work - a rate of \$62.00 per hour.

The real issue of cost and effectiveness rests with the overall results of the service. Many pets and owners benefit from traditional classes in the park. Stubborn or difficult to train animals may not learn under group conditions. Animals with serious behavior problems are best served by skilled professionals in a "one on one" setting. As with most things, a little research up front may save you time and money later.

Selecting the highest priced trainer does not guarantee that you will get the best trainer. Ask your veterinarian and friends for professional and personal recommendations.

If the trainer advertises behavior modification for solving problems, ask for veterinary references. Some medical conditions appear to be behavioral problems. If the trainer does not have a good working relationship with at least one veterinarian he may attempt to solve a physical problem with an inappropriate behavioral solution - you and your dog will pay the price for his lack of knowledge.

The best dog trainer may not be the best people trainer. If the trainer does not leave you with practical skills

after the training is over, the service is of little use. Shortly after the trainer goes away your dog's skill will leave too.

To take advantage of any training course, you must practice in order to be proficient. Much of the success of any program depends on you. If you want to play the fiddle or train your dog, you have to practice.

Be wary of harsh training measures directed at the dogs or at the students. Brow beating and humiliation are not good tools to teach humans or animals. If you feel uncomfortable about the way your dog is being handled, say something immediately. If the trainer cannot give you a reasonable assurance that the technique is safe and effective - don't do it.

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