

Differences Among Animal Behaviorists, Trainers, and Handlers

Our topics for this week are:

- **The various roles of animal handlers, trainers, and behaviorists.**
- **Training methods for animal handlers, trainers, and behaviorists.**
- **The value of certifications as animal behaviorist, trainer, or handler.**

Animal handlers, animal trainers, and animal behaviorists have some overlaps in their knowledge and abilities, but there are distinct differences in their goals and distribution of knowledge level and skills. It is important to understand the differences and strengths of each.

Some handlers, trainers, and all behaviorists go through some certification process intended to prove their level of knowledge and abilities. However, most of these certification pathways are not managed by a third party without financial conflicts of interest. Several of them are marketing tools to increase membership in fee generating associations or sales of over-the-counter products claimed to have benefits for animals. These certificates are of less value than a well-written letter of reference from an ethical and competent animal handler or trainer without conflicts of interest.

Animal Handlers

People who domesticated animals were handlers. They interacted with animals by learning their behaviors and gradually alleviating their fear of humans. After the animals were domesticated, handlers would catch and restrain the animals to modify their behavior or to treat the animals' illnesses and injuries. Animal handlers are still the "front line" to animal care. Animals that are brought to trainers or animal behaviorists have first been captured, handled, and restrained by animal handlers. Animal handlers need to be aware of zoonotic diseases, especially those that can be transmitted to humans by healthy-appearing animals. Animal trainers and animal behaviorists are second levels of care and do not need to maintain the level of vigilance for zoonotic diseases that an animal handler does.

Veterinarians, veterinary technicians, animal control officers, shepherds, and herdsmen are among the many who still must know normal animal behavior and catch and restrain animals. They are animal handlers. In most cases, learning to become an effective animal handler entails self study and supervision by an experienced animal handler through a formal or informal internship, assistant's position, or apprenticeship.

Animal handlers must deal with animals that are trained or untrained or animals having behavioral problems that are treated or untreated for behavioral problems when handling is needed. They usually do not get to pick the animal, the time, or the conditions in which the animal is handled or restrained.

No certification is required to become an animal handler. There are training materials and certifications for small animal handlers, but they are not regulated by a third party. The certificates are expensive, and tied to sales of products of corporate sponsors. In the case of one popular, for-profit, animal handling company, veterinary practices can be certified. The site visits are done by employees of the products promoted by the certifying company. Another certification can be earned from an association of cat practitioners, but membership in their association is a requirement. They also promote the sales of corporate sponsors of their certification processes.

Animal Trainers

Most professional animal trainers are either dog or horse trainers. They primarily deal with young normal animals and assist their socialization with humans and desensitization to the world they will live in. Trainers deal with the animals they train over extended training periods in controlled environments. Effective trainers must also be human trainers since the person who will work with the animal after the trainer's initial training of the animal must know how to continue the same process with the animal on a permanent basis. Dog and horse trainers generally pick which animals will be trained and the environment in which the training occurs.

No certification is required to become a dog or horse trainer. Some trainers and animal associations with interests in training offer certification but there is no third party accreditation of certifying groups for trainers. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers provides training information and passing of a certifying exam. I am not aware of any financial conflicts of interest this group has with their certifying requirements. The Equine Studies Institute grants Professional Horse Trainer's certification after the completion of online courses. It is not accredited as an institution of higher learning and has no third party administration of their certificate process. I am unaware of any verified outcome assessments of students who have completed certification by the Association of Professional Dog Trainers or the Equine Studies Institute.

Animal Behaviorists

There are no state or federal regulations for people to claim to be an animal behaviorist. True animal behaviorists are trained professionals, either veterinarian or veterinary technician specialists. A certified animal behaviorist who is a veterinarian is the best source of information on how to diagnose abnormal behavior and what corrective measures to prescribe. Animal behaviorist veterinarians typically use veterinary technicians as animal handlers during the diagnosis and treatment of animal behavior problems.

Two governing bodies exist with requirements for formal education and evidence of acquired knowledge and skills for veterinarians: the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB) and the Animal Behavior Society. There is also a Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians and an Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (AVBT) that certifies veterinary technician specialists in animal behavior. Members of the ACVB or AVBT

have gone through multiple levels of higher educational training and continuing education. Their certification processes are overseen by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Most certified animal behaviorists provide essential diagnostic and treatment services to owners of animals, primarily dogs and horses, with abnormal behaviors. They are not always the best source of information on the techniques of routine animal handling or performance training of various species nor the most skilled. For example, Temple Grandin is an animal handler, not a certified animal behaviorist, but she is the foremost authority on livestock handling and restraint.

Conclusions

Knowing basic animal behavior is essential for anyone to become a good animal handler. However, to become a good animal handler or trainer also requires an ability to interpret animal actions and the reflexes to respond in a timely metered fashion, appropriate to the situation, including the humane use of physical restraints. Some excellent animal handlers or trainers may only be able to describe normal animal behavior in non-technical language while some excellent animal behaviorists may have less than average skills as a animal handler or trainer.

Be aware some certification programs for animal handlers or trainers exist primarily as marketing tools for corporate sales of animal behavior products or to boost membership in animal care associations. If choosing a certification program to prepare to become an animal handler or trainer, one should determine if there is third party management of the certification process and review outcome assessments to verify an appropriate return on the investment of attaining certification.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Certification as an animal handler, trainer, or behaviorist should be administered by a third party.**
- 2. Costs of certification as an investment for future success as an animal handler, trainer, or behaviorist should be closely reviewed.**
- 3. Licensed veterinarians or veterinary technicians with certification as a specialist in animal behavior are the best authorities on the diagnosis and treatment of abnormal behaviors in domestic animals.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.