

BOOT CAMP FOR DOGS

By Kerry Vinson, BA

Over the past few years, I have noticed an increase in the number of “doggie boot camps” in southern Ontario. These slickly marketed operations sound almost too good to be true, as they promise to correct even serious behaviour problems and return Fido back to his owners well behaved. As there seems to be a growing number of behaviour problems being displayed by *canis familiaris*, the proliferation of these training facilities seem to fill a need – or are they merely cashing in on the multi-million dollar dog products and services market?

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to explore the concept behind these organizations. In today's fast paced world, people are always looking for a quick fix to a problem, and the idea of having someone else solve a canine behaviour dilemma for you certainly sounds appealing. However, a thorough understanding of the nature of the family dog seems to indicate that the concept of a third party correcting the animal's inappropriate behaviour is unlikely.

Members of the canid species are hierarchical pack animals. They recognize a strict rank order in their own pack, which in the case of pet dogs, is usually made up mainly of human beings. Dogs will never accept discipline or direction from any member of the pack that they view as inferior. This principle is at the root of many of the behavioural problems that I come across in my private practice. It poses the question as to whether or not someone who is not in the dog's “pack” can affect change in a problem behaviour.

To clarify this issue, I contacted Gary Landsberg, DVM, a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviourists, to get his viewpoint. According to Dr. Landsberg, “Many behavioural problems in dogs are related to the relationship between the pet and its owner. Therefore, the correction of a behavioural problem at a training facility is not necessarily transferable to the dog's owner.”

My own opinion is very similar, albeit, based mainly on anecdotal evidence. I have received reports from several clients about unsatisfactory results after sending their dogs to a boot camp. In any situation that a dog is being subjected to a behaviour modification programme without the owner's participation, the prospect of long-term improvement of problem behaviour is questionable.

According to Dr. Landsberg, “People should be very careful when considering such an option, because if they send their dog away, they are uncertain of the trainer's methodology, their current level of knowledge and education, and if they are using humane techniques and providing acceptable housing.”

I should point out that both Dr. Landsberg and I agree there are some situations that could be successfully

addressed in a setting other than the dog's home environment. For example, acclimatizing the dog to a head halter or desensitizing it to other dogs. My main concern would be in cases of canine aggression, as ample research exists to confirm that the use of punishment-based techniques are counterproductive for long-term improvements. Not only does the owner need to be aware of exactly what is being done to their dog, but in certain cases (e.g.: dominance related aggression), the owner's family needs to participate in a non-confrontational behaviour modification programme to control unwanted behaviour.

Unfortunately, when faced with a serious canine behaviour problem like aggression, people are often not sure where to turn for advice. Instead of contacting their veterinarian, they may consult relatives or friends, turn to the Internet, or just open the Yellow Pages. The chances of getting accurate advice from such sources is unlikely. I am continually amazed at how many individuals have reportedly spend thousands of dollars to send their dog to a “boot camp” they found in the ‘phone book! In one instance, I received a call from someone wishing to file a civil suit against a particular boot camp and wondering if I would testify on their behalf. I declined to do so.

So, what can veterinarians say to their clients if they are asked about sending a dog away to correct a behaviour problem? Before engaging anyone to modify a serious problem like aggression, dog owners should be asking for a specific description of the methods that are to be used to change the behaviour. Owners should also ask to participate in, or observe, any behaviour modification exercises. Another question worth asking is the education level of the person working with their dog, and where they learned their methodology. Finally, and most importantly, demand a list of verifiable references, preferably from veterinarians who have observed positive changes in the dogs belonging to their clients. If the facility is unable to provide a list of veterinary references, ask why not. Until there are enforced regulations on such facilities – an unlikely occurrence in the foreseeable future – the onus is on dog owners to do some research in order to avoid making a regrettable decision.

Kerry Vinson is the holder of a BA degree in Psychology, and has studied animal learning extensively. He has completed courses in canine behaviour at Cornell University and Kansas State University and is the founder of Animal Behaviour Consultants, which addresses behaviour problems in most companion animals. Dogs are treated with behaviour modification programmes to resolve problems such as separation anxiety, displacement activity and aggression.

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