

So, you want to become an animal behaviorist?

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Note from Patricia: *Julie Hecht has a Masters in Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare from the University of Edinburgh. She conducted research on the “guilty look” in dogs with the [Family Dog Project](#) in Budapest, and now manages Alexandra Horowitz’s [Dog Cognition Lab](#) at Barnard College in New York City. She explores the science behind dogs at [DogSpies.com](#). She is a good friend and colleague of mine and knows more than anyone I work with about academic programs around the world related to companion animal behavior, which is why I asked her to write this article. I added a bit here and there, but she deserves the credit for answering this oft-asked question for us! Thanks Julie!*

There are many paths to the top of the mountain, and this is particularly true for those who want to work with animals (If you played Chutes and Ladders or read Choose Your Own Adventure books, you already know this, right?) This article discusses the different directions one can take to **become** an animal behaviorist. But first, what exactly *is* an animal behaviorist?

What is an animal behaviorist?

Animal behaviorists can work in any number of settings with a variety of species. Broadly speaking, as defined by the Animal Behavior Society, animal behaviorists specialize in *“the behavior of companion animals in relation to behavioral problems and training, the behavior of farm, zoo and laboratory animals (i.e. animal management and welfare) and the behavior of wild animals from an applied perspective, (i.e. wildlife management, pest management or nature conservation).”*

Animal behaviorists work with animals that are managed or controlled by people, and their work enhances both animals’ well-being and the human-animal relationship. Animal behaviorists might design an environmental enrichment program for Koalas at the zoo, help an owner manage and rehabilitate a fearful dog, consult with a family to decrease intra-cat aggression in a home, or design a study on stress in shelter rabbits. The possibilities are endless! In preparation for this work, animal behaviorists are trained to define, observe, quantify and very often, change the behavior of our non-human friends.

Regrettably, anyone can call themselves a “behaviorist,” but well qualified behaviorists have all followed one of the paths outlined below.

Pathways to becoming an animal behaviorist

There are three primary roads to becoming an animal behaviorist: 1) Academic: A PhD or Master's specializing in animal behavior, 2) Medical: A veterinary specialty in behavior (a two year program after receiving one's DVM), and 3) Professional Dog Trainer specializing in behavior modification. Here is more information about each of these perspectives.

1. The Academic route (CAAB and ACAAB)

Certified animal behaviorists are approved through the Animal Behavior Society (ABS). A Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB) has a doctoral degree, and an Associate Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (ACAAB) has a masters degree. Both must have taken a specified number of courses in behavior and psychology, and have a graduate degree (usually in Psychology or Zoology) that included research on a related topic. After an academic foundation, applicants must have five years experience working in the “applied” setting and must exhibit that they have contributed to the practice of applied animal behavior.

There are *many* animal behavior programs throughout the world, and they focus on any number of areas such as biology, psychology, animal behavior, animal science or zoology. Regardless of the specialization, the coursework must provide a strong foundation in learning theory, comparative psychology, ethology, experimental psychology and physiology. Animal behaviorists use this foundational training later in their work to help those seeking advice — whether about animal behavior in general or about specific behavior problems.

During graduate training, animal behaviorists must conduct original research with a focus on both methods and analysis. This training allows behaviorists to describe, analyze and assess research and reflect on its relevance to our four-legged friends.

Patricia is a prime example of someone who uses her background in research to discuss scientific studies and share them with a general audience. Here are some examples of linking research with its practical applications:

[Size Matters](#)

[New Info about Treatment for SA? Yes and No](#)

Academic Resources

[Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist](#)
[Animal Behavior Society](#)

Here are a few academic programs that might be useful to anyone interested in pursuing this path:

[Animal Behavior Society Guide to Programs in Animal Behavior](#)

Undergraduate

[Carroll College](#), Helena, MT: Anthrozoology (canine or equine track)
[Canisius College](#), Buffalo, NY: Animal Behavior, Ecology and Conservation
[University of Bristol](#), UK: Animal Behaviour and Welfare
[University of Lincoln](#), UK: Animal Behaviour Science

Are you studying at the University of Wisconsin like Karen London (CAAB), Patricia and I (Julie Hecht) all did? I recommend taking Patricia's class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, [*The Biology and Philosophy of Human-Animal Relationships*](#).

Graduate

[Hunter College](#), New York, NY: Animal Behavior and Conservation
[University of California-Davis](#), CA: Animal Behavior (option to focus on Applied Animal Behavior)
[University of Lincoln](#), UK: Animal Behaviour and Welfare
[University of Edinburgh](#), Scotland: Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare
[University of British Columbia](#), Vancouver, Canada: Animal Welfare Program
[University of Guelph](#), Canada: The Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare

2. The Veterinary Behaviorist Route (DACVB)

Veterinarians, of course, work with animals every day. But not all veterinarians are skilled in the study of animal behavior. However, there is a path to learn about behavioral problems and their treatment through the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Diplomates of the College (DACVB) are veterinarians who specialize in the prevention and treatment of behavioral disorders in companion and other animal species. They have completed a two-year residency under the supervision of a veterinary behaviorist, passed an exam given by The American College of Veterinary Behavior and authored a scientific paper for a peer-reviewed journal.

Veterinary behaviorists have studied topics such as sociobiology, psychology of learning, behavioral genetics, behavioral physiology, psychopharmacology, ethology and behavioral endocrinology. They have the medical and behavioral background to determine whether there are medical aspects to behavior cases, and if necessary, whether medication should be integrated into a behavior modification treatment plan. CAABs and DACVBs very often work together.

Veterinary Behavior Resources

[American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#)

[The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior](#) (AVSAB) Animal Behavior Symposium

[Society for Veterinary Behavior Technicians](#) (SVBT): SVBT promotes science-based training, management and behavior modification for veterinary behavior technicians. They provide a forum for discussion and continuing education to strengthen the veterinary health care team.

[Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians](#) (AVBT): The AVBT will provide certification for veterinary technicians who specialize in the field of behavior.

Veterinary Behavior Programs

[Conforming residency programs](#) found on ACVB website

[Tufts University](#), North Grafton, MA: Animal Behavior Clinic

[University of California-Davis](#), CA: Center for Companion Animal Health

[University of Pennsylvania](#), Philadelphia, PA: Behavioral Medicine

[Purdue University](#), IL: Animal Behavior Clinic

3. Dog Trainer Extraordinaire route

My next-door neighbor has lived with dogs her entire life. Her present dynamic duo tend to bark and lunge incessantly as they walk down the street. Unfortunately, if she wanted, my neighbor could call herself a “trainer” or a “behaviorist”— there is nothing to prevent her from doing so. The use of the term “behaviorist” is controversial, with some believing that only those in categories #1 and #2 above should be allowed to call themselves behaviorists. Here’s what Patricia has to say about what skills and knowledge anyone needs to have to treat serious behavioral problems:

[Who Should Treat Behavior Problems in Dogs & Cats](#)

How do you distinguish between a “trainer,” like my next-door neighbor, a trainer who knows how to teach your dog to sit and lie down, and a trainer who is truly knowledgeable about all aspects of animal behavior, and experienced in humanely and effectively addressing problem behaviors?

First off, know that trainers who handle serious behavior problems should have a solid background in learning theory and animal behavior. They should understand the theory and application of operant conditioning and classical conditioning and be experienced in their use. Equally important, (and this is true of all groups!) they should know enough to know what they know and what they don't know. People working with behavior problems with this background have worked with dogs extensively, studied behavior on their own through readings and seminar attendance and have had the opportunity to be mentored by others in the field. Notable and well-respected examples of professional trainers are [Trish King](#) and [Pia Silvani](#).

Dog Trainer Links

Several notable professional organizations for trainers include:

[Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers](#) (CCPDT)

CCPDT is a testing and certification body for animal training and behavior professionals. Those who pass the CPDT test typically include the letters CPDT after their name, Certified Professional Dog Trainer.

[Association of Pet Dog Trainers](#) (APDT)

APDT is a professional organization that provides continuing education for trainers. They focus on cutting-edge canine behavior research as well as training techniques that enhance the human-dog bond. The APDT prioritizes the idea that learning and training should be enjoyable for both dogs and humans alike.

[Karen Pryor Academy](#)

What can a ‘click’ do for you and your dog? Lots! The Karen Pryor Academy specializes in clicker training, a type of operant conditioning where animals learn to repeat desirable behaviors through the use of a clicker — a mechanical device that makes a short “click” noise. Dogs learn that a “click” means, “YES! Do that! That’s what I want you to do!” and wanted behaviors are reinforced and those that are

unwanted disappear through lack of reinforcement. Of note, clicker training can help when teaching animals complex behaviors.

[Ethology Institute](#), Cambridge e-learning Institute:

[International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) (IAABC)

What about other companion animals? The IAABC is a membership organization that certifies those who work with dogs, cats, parrots, horses and working animals. IAABC members have “proven competency in assessing behavior cases and are experienced in behavior science, learning theory, training methods, biological sciences and ethology.”

IN SUMMARY: Here is Patricia’s summary of what anyone needs to be qualified to work with serious behavioral problems:

“Anyone who wants to work with serious behavioral problems in companion animals needs three things: 1) Practical, hands-on experience working with the species in question and a skill set that enables one to influence their behavior effectively and humanely, 2) An understanding of the species’ ethology, or behavior, in their natural environment, and 3) An understanding of the science behind influencing behavior, including operant and classical conditioning.

I say this over and over again, but this is the only way I can wrap my mind around it — The study of animal behavior is about trying to see another’s perspective. And for this reason, dogs offer a unique challenge. We easily grasp that bald eagles — with the unmotorized gift of flight — have a different perspective from us land-bound mortals. But with dogs, we can easily forget that they are not simply furry people. Dogs have their own unique way of being, and behaviorists work (incredibly hard!) to prioritize dogs’ perspectives and enhance understanding and relationships between humans and dogs. Those claiming “whisperer” or “communicator” status may not view dogs through the lenses described earlier, and just because a “theory” about dog behavior is repeated ad nauseam, doesn’t make it valid.

Ideas that are “sticky” usually have some devil in them. They are too simple to be true. Even “monogamous” species are not *always* monogamous. They might be monogamous in terms of child-rearing, but still doing a little something extra with

someone else on the side. The dominance ideology is no different. “Schools” and “colleges” that use force and coercion are not based on dog ethology or learning theory, particularly because time and time again, dog behavior research finds that the dog-human relationship is supported by cooperation, not conflict. As Patricia says, *“Be cautious about throwing down thousands of dollars to learn to ‘get dominance over your dog.’ No, do more than be cautious..... just don’t do it!”*

When it comes to becoming an Animal Behaviorist, while there is a lot to avoid out there, there is also a lot of good. With so many wonderful avenues to becoming an Animal Behaviorist, the question becomes, which one is right for you?