

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT DOG TRAINERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA?

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Dog guardians often seek out the services of professional trainers to help teach their dogs basic manners, general obedience, and specific working and sport-related skills. In addition, veterinarians often recommend training to their clients as a remedy for unwanted behaviours and to help dogs overcome difficulties, such as fearful behaviour or separation anxiety.

Similarly, dog guardians often turn to veterinary professionals to ask which trainer they should hire. Finding and recommending trainers presents a challenge to both veterinarians and dog guardians because it is an unregulated profession without licensure or requirements for trainer credentials or training methods, and because trainers can disagree on their beliefs regarding how dogs should be trained.

The scientific evidence is clear that reward-based approaches are more effective and better protect dog welfare. Aversive-based methods have been associated with negative impacts on animal welfare, the human-animal bond, and training success. This has been recognized in the position statements of organizations such as the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA, 2021) and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB, 2021), which strongly recommend the use of reward-based training methods and discourage aversive-based approaches.

However, dog guardians do not necessarily know this when they search for a trainer. A company's website is often the first point of contact for selecting a trainer, and the quality and clarity of the information it provides can greatly influence this decision. Unfortunately, prior research (e.g., Johnson & Wynne, 2023; Todd, 2018) found that some of the barriers for guardians in adopting reward-based approaches include the poor quality of information that is available about training, including lack of transparency and accuracy.

In collaborative research from UBC and the BC SPCA, we set out to collect and analyze the information from 281 public websites of dog training businesses in British Columbia. The goal of the study was to learn about the training credentials, services, modes, and methods used.

We collected this information during 2023 and included the number of trainers, gender and training credentials of the lead trainer(s), training methodology, modes and types of training services, and whether other pet services were offered. We classified training method as

reward-based, aversive-based, or unclear. Types of training services included basic training, behavioural modification, separation anxiety, dog sports, and service and therapy dog training. Mode of training included in-person individual and group classes, online individual and group classes, self-paced videos, and day training (e.g., in-person training without the guardian present). We also collected data on other pet services the business offered, including daycare, boarding, pet sitting, cosmetic dental scaling, cat training, grooming, and dog walking.

A remarkable finding was that 72% of the businesses were identified as using only reward-based training methods, which is very promising for dog welfare in BC.

In line with prior research, we observed that it was more likely for reward-based training businesses than aversive-based businesses to list training credentials on their websites. Additionally, women outnumbered men as lead trainers and were also more likely to employ reward-based methods as well as hold training credentials.

We found that the most frequent mode of training offered was in-person individual sessions followed by in-person group classes. Moreover, online training via video calls was offered by approximately one-third of the businesses. These options potentially provide timely and accessible ways for guardians to receive training support without the need for travel. In addition, online sessions may also be beneficial for fearful or reactive dogs to receive professional training support without the added stress of interacting with an unfamiliar person, but more research is needed to compare the effectiveness of in-person and online training classes. In terms of types of services, we identified basic training as the most widely offered, followed by training for behavioural challenges. Finally, approximately one-quarter of the businesses offered animal-related services other than training. The most popular ones were boarding, daycare, and dog walking. Board-and-train as well as boarding (care only) services were more likely to be offered by aversive-based businesses, which underscores the need for guardians to find out more information about training methods when considering these services.

However, training methods were not clear on all websites, and approximately one-third of them did not include any training credentials. Conversely, the vast majority of companies provided easily accessible information about the modality and type of training services offered. This suggests that this is the type of

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information that most dog guardians may prioritize when choosing a trainer, rather than focusing on the specific methods or credentials of the trainer.

A limitation of this research is that the information on a website may not always reflect the company's actual practices, whether intentionally or unintentionally. However, this mirrors the real-life challenge guardians face when relying on a website to choose a trainer.

A key takeaway for dog guardians and the veterinary community is the need to carefully scrutinize the educational qualifications of dog trainers. This includes asking about the methods and tools used during training sessions as well as seeking clarification about the trainer's credentials if they are unclear or unavailable. Veterinarians can offer guidance to guardians by asking about the way they train their dogs as well as emphasizing the benefits of reward-based approaches. Guardians in BC can be directed to the BC SPCA's AnimalKind program, which is a valuable resource listing accredited companies that have been confirmed to use only reward-based methods.

To save space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter's website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine. [WCV](#)