

Careers in Pet Behaviour

By Sarah Whitehead

So you want to be a pet behaviourist?

It's official - I have the best job in the world! To me, working as a pet behaviour counsellor is a dream come true. Few people get to earn a living from their hobby, and even fewer can truly say that they are their own boss in their own right.

Interestingly, more and more people are now considering behaviour work in some form as a career. Traditionally, those that wanted to work with animals had a rather limited choice. Veterinary medicine means high-flying qualifications, while other forms of animal care is often poorly-paid and frequently manual in emphasis.

However, for anyone considering a career change, or a lifetime working in this field, there are one or two home truths that need to be explored!

What is a pet behaviour counsellor?

This may seem like an obvious question. However, the very title is open to interpretation.

Personally, I never refer to my role as a 'behaviourist' - this is technically incorrect as it actually defines someone who studies observable behaviour, but does not intervene. Correctly titled, a pet behaviour counsellor, or rehabilitation trainer, acts to offer suggestions to troubled pet owners, so that they themselves can choose the option which best suits them and their pet. These options are based on a good knowledge of theory and an even bigger helping of practical experience, which will help the behaviour counsellor to predict the dog or cat's behaviour to the best extent possible.

Beyond the first consultation, the counsellor's role is then to ensure that the family and pet is supported throughout the behaviour modification process with help and practical training. This is often time consuming. I have clients on my books that are still in touch several years after I originally saw their pet. They like the fact that they can call me for further support and occasional pieces of advice, long after the initial difficulty was resolved.

As you may have already guessed, in order to enjoy this work, a pet behaviour counsellor needs to like animals, and love people! So much of the job is communication with our own species that the opportunity to observe and work with companion animals as well is a real bonus!

Get training!

It's a sad fact that some folk seem to regard training as a bit of a poor relation to behaviour work! Nothing could be further from the truth. It is essential that all behaviour counsellors have excellent practical handling and training skills - and that trainers have good behavioural understanding!

Pros and cons!

Pet behaviour counselling is never a get-rich-quick possibility! Done properly, the counselling part of the process can often be lengthy, and sometimes repetitive. By the time the veterinary liaison, veterinary reports, owner reports and follow-up consultations have been done, the hourly rate must be well below the minimum wage! This does not even take into consideration the hours of research, reading,

consultation with other specialists and just plain worry that goes into many cases - for anyone who thinks that this can be done nine to five, think again!

Of course, the up-sides of the job balance such challenges completely. The satisfaction of helping a dog and owner repair and re-establish their relationship, of bringing understanding where there was conflict, or of running training classes to prevent problems occurring, can be immensely rewarding. Pet behaviour counselling is not a job - it's a lifetime vocation. Despite all the hard work and heartache, the incredible variety, fun and sheer fascination make it all worthwhile.

Learning more...

If you are interested in learning more about pet behaviour counselling, a number of courses exist to help you take the first step in the right direction. There is no one set route into pet behaviour counselling or training, and I would always recommend taking as many courses as possible to gain the widest view of the theories and practical techniques available. Always ensure that a nationally recognised awarding body accredits any course. Beware courses which claim to 'qualify' individuals as behaviourists - there is no such thing - and always ask about the practical application of the course content: theory always needs to be backed up by practical skills, making down-to-earth training experience absolutely vital.

If you are keen to get started, my personal recommendations are:

- Think Dog - home study foundation course in behaviour and training, includes fieldwork and practical input. Six months' duration. OCN (Open College Network) accredited. For more information visit www.thinkdog.org
- Talk Dog - Understanding canine facial expression and body language. Four months' duration. Field work, video material included. OCN accredited. For more information visit www.thinkdog.org
- Puppy Class Instructor course. Home study and practical weekend. OCN accredited. For more information visit www.thinkdog.org
- Kind, Fair, Effective - Practical Skills for Dog Trainers - Association of Pet Dog Trainers. OCN accredited. For more information visit www.apdt.co.uk.