Cool for Cats: Appropriate socialization, training, physical and mental enrichment, and meeting basic needs to reduce behavior issues
Behind the Scenes

In the first of a four-part article, Frania Shelley-Grielen addresses the lack of regulation in the pet care and services industry, and wonders how standards can be improved for pets and their owners.

Americans love pets. We love them so much that most of us, or 68 percent of us, live with them. That’s 85 million families according to the 2017-2018 National Pet Owners’ Survey (American Pet Products Association, 2018). Cats are our number one pet because we usually have more than one, but more of us have dogs. That makes 60 million dog-owning families with 90 million dogs at home and 47 million cat-owning families with 94 million cats at home. With so many pets in so many doggedly devoted and cat caring families the chances of everyone having enough time to train, groom, walk and care for them with our hectic days and busy schedules guarantees that, if it hasn’t already, the 70 billion dollar pet services industry will become a part of who is taking care of your pet. But, have you ever wondered about the pet service providers? The people who work with your pets? How did they learn to do what they do? Are they as qualified and experienced as you expect or as they say they are? How would you know? How can you know?

There is no question that pet owners who support the pet care industry (i.e. the walkers, sitters, groomers, trainers, day cares, boarding kennels, catteries and more) are what one might consider to be the “more responsible pet owner” who depends on these services to supplement the care they give their pets. Responsible pet owners believe that part of loving pets is doing everything possible to meet their needs; that there is a comfort in feeding the cat looking for breakfast before that first cup of coffee, or in the crack of dawn rush out the door so the dog can sniff the morning dew and relieve a full bladder from the night before. Loving pets means searching for the best cat litter, dog food, puzzle feeder or that last walk of the day before bed even when you are exhausted. These pet owners are in all likelihood the ones who are willing to pay for services they believe match the standard they provide for their own animal.

Contracting out a portion of pet care responsibilities does not just mean that a pet’s needs will be met, but that the owner will feel a greater peace of mind to accompany the transaction. This is because not always being able to be there for our pets can cause more than passing concern. We worry about them, and pet care services provide relief – for the cat owner who knows the cat needs the litter box cleaned early in the day and likes to be fed on schedule, or the dog owner who stresses that their dog is bored, lonely or needs a good walk.

In the United States, no training of any kind is required to work in any capacity with an animal, except as a veterinarian or veterinary technician. With no educational requirements and no guarantee that the training a pet care worker may have received is force-free or welfare based, workers may instead rely on their own intuition, guesswork, and trial and error to figure out how to do their jobs – with your pets on the receiving end of any error.
or two when they are at work for 12 hours a day. We want humane care and training for our pets, where they are safe, are treated humanely and are well-looked after. This is what we are paying for, or so we think.

Owners select pet care services believing they have chosen the best available at a reasonable price in a convenient location. Drawn in by websites and ads overflowing with fluffy puppies, dogs at play, contented cats, devoted handlers and slogans like, “So many butts to sniff, so little time,” “A lot of fun, maybe a snooze, a lotta love,” “Our mission: to enhance the physical and emotional health of every canine client,” promise positive pampering and more. Providers know their customers and are all too eager to reassure you that you have picked the best of the best and your pet will receive only the most tender loving care and handling. They make our schedules so much easier and are a breeze to use, even collecting our pets at the beginning of a day and bringing them back to us at night, if we so desire. In my experience, however, there can be a decided disconnect between what is being advertised and what is actually delivered.

A closer look at the pet services industries shows a multibillion dollar business where, in some cases, the promise rather than the requirement of good animal welfare practices keep it healthy and robust. New York City is one of the largest cities of pet owners with an estimated 1.1 million pets and a pet services industry with “some of the fastest growth rates of any industry” in both the city and the nation. “From 2000 to 2010, employment in the pet-related industry grew by more than 30 percent locally and nationally, reflecting both growth in the pet population and increased spending per pet by households. We further estimate that spending in this industry in New York City exceeded $1.5 billion in 2010 or roughly $1,350 per pet.” (New York City Economic Development Corporation, 2012). And as the industry grows, so does the need for workers: “Employment of animal care and service workers is projected to grow 22 percent from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average for all occupations.” (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Unregulated Industry
What many pet owners may not be aware of is the simple fact that pet care services are currently a virtually unregulated field, from food and retail products to the services supplied by people to pets. And that this lack of regulation combined with for profit business, can make for a less than ideal combination for pets. In the United States, no training of any kind is required to work in any capacity with an animal, except as a veterinarian or veterinary technician. With no educational requirements and no guarantee that the training a pet care worker may have received is force-free or welfare based, workers may instead rely on their own intuition, guesswork, and trial and error to figure out how to do their jobs — with your pets on the receiving end of any error. The misguided belief by some in the need for “pack leaders” and the misguided application of dominance theory with little or no formal understanding of how this does not apply to dogs’ social structure (or cats) can make even a dog walk a miserable experience for the dog who may find himself being “corrected” for his eagerness to get out the door to relieve himself. Meanwhile, where regulations do exist for pet care facilities or breeding operations, they mainly address physical space, housing and sanitation rather than staffing requirements.

Animal Lovers
People who enter the pet services field are often attracted to it by a love for animals and a desire to be surrounded by them. The reality is, however, that pet care services can be more about cleaning and disinfecting and less about dog kisses and purring kittens. Scooping litter boxes, picking up dog waste, wiping up urine and vomit, cleaning cages, changing water bowls and bottles, and scheduled feeding times are all essential in the world of animal care and can take up significant amounts of time. Manual labor and offensive odors come with the terri-

A Constructional Approach
“Unfortunately, the pet training industry is entirely unregulated, meaning that anyone can say they are a trainer or behavior consultant. As a result, those who call themselves dog trainers, or even “dog whisperers,” may still be utilizing punitive methods, such as disc throwing, loud correctional “no’s” and, in some cases, more extreme tools such as shock collars, choke chains and prong collars. All of these are, sadly, still at large. They are training tools that, by design, have one purpose: to reduce or stop behavior through pain and fear. This, as opposed to a constructional approach where operant behaviors are built, and problematic emotional reactions are changed via positive reinforcement and counterconditioning protocols.

“Humane, modern animal training relies on science-based protocols: ‘Within the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA), there is a 40-year-old standard that promotes the most positive, least intrusive behavior reduction procedures (also known as the Least Restrictive Behavior Intervention, LROBI),’ (Friedman, 2010). Regardless, there are trainers who elect not to move into this arena, and/or gain informed consent from clients regarding methods and equipment used. They may still be members of professional institutes, associations and councils because many organizations do not hold their members accountable for the training methods they use. Consequently, it is easy to be fooled when searching for a training or behavior professional.”

- Pet Professional Guild (2016) Open Letter to Veterinarians on Referrals to Training and Behavior Professionals
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cellent boarding and day care facilities (for just one example, see The Right Environment, BARKS from the Guild, September 2016, pp. 39-41).

Having said that, as I have already stated, when looking at the bigger picture, pet service providers may not always be the experts we would like them to be. And they don’t have to be. Because there are no regulatory requirements for formal education or licensing, even a rudimentary knowledge of animal behavior and stress-free handling may not be required or trained by a pet care service establishment. Rather, “liking” animals and good customer service skills may be what employers are looking for in a new hire.

For the individual that wants to learn on their own, there is a wealth of online material and popular literature on animal behavior and training, some of which offers misleading, conflicting, inaccurate and outdated information. This includes force-based, compulsion training (also known as “result” or “balanced” training) and handling methods relying on out-of-date dominance theories and punishment devices such as prong, choke or shock collars (also known as “training” or “e” collars). Research into aversive methods of dog training show that dogs will typically exhibit fear-based behaviors around trainers who use force and that other problem behaviors, such as aggression, may result (hardly the sort of outcome the dog owner is hoping for or paying for). Fearful behavior itself is often misunderstood and may even be offered as evidence by trainers that their methods proffer “results.”

Qualifications

Persons wanting to learn dog grooming at an actual brick and mortar school will find courses that can be completed in just two or three months, which, in my opinion, is not nearly long enough to develop serious expertise before handling sharpened scissors and electric clippers. Such a short training period and lack of instruction in body language, stress-free restraint or handling methods risks an over-reliance on physical restraints such as muzzles, ties and aversive handling. Stress of this sort may cause a dog to submit to grooming initially but lead to more defensive resistance on successive grooming sessions. Such approaches to dog training and grooming are incredibly stressful for pets, and can, sadly, also go horribly wrong.

In the second part of this article I will look more into education, internships, and canine behavior based on my personal experience and in the context of dog day care centers in New York City.

References


Resources

Pet Professional Guild Member Directory: petprofessionalguild.com/Zip-Code-Search

Frania Shelley-Grielen is a New York City-based professional animal behavior consultant, dog trainer and educator who holds a Master’s in animal behavior from Hunter College, New York City, and a Master's in urban planning from New York University. She is a licensed pet care technician instructor, a registered therapy dog handler, and a certified Doggone Safe bite safety instructor, and specializes in behavior modification work and training with cats, dogs and birds and humane management for urban wildlife. She is also the author of Cats and Dogs: Living with and Looking at Companion Animals from their Point of View and founded AnimalBehaviorist.us (animalbehaviorist.us) in 2009 to share her work. She has also taught the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ (ASPCA) fundamentals of dog care course for the Houlton Institute in San Francisco, California where she is on the zoology faculty. She has worked on research projects at the Wildlife Conservation Society, the American Museum of Natural History and the ASPCA in New York City.