Training

Should You Send Your Dog to a Board and Train “Dog Boot Camp”?

In the best of circumstances, sending your dog away for training at a “board and train” facility can be a good way to accelerate your dog’s education. Just know that you, too, will need to learn from the trainer so you and your dog are on the same page. (And watch out for unscrupulous or dangerous trainers.) Here’s what to know about boarding and training before you drop off your dog.

By **Stephanie Colman** - **Published:** February 21, 2023 0



When evaluating a trainer that you are thinking about hiring, it’s important for you to see him or her in action – preferably training several clients’ dogs (not just their own dog), and preferably when working with a dog who seems to be at the same level of training as your dog. Photo by Gajus, Getty Images

Have you considered sending your dog to stay with a trainer for some intensive training? This is commonly known as a "board and train" arrangement – but sometimes marketed as a dog training "boot camp" – and it comes with definite pros and cons. You dog may, in fact, learn a lot in a short amount of time. But you need to understand that you, too, will need to take some lessons so that you and your dog understand the behavior cues and criteria that will help him succeed in your home. And you need to look out for signs that not all is well with the trainer's methods or business management.

What is Board and Train?

The term "board and train" refers to a type of training arrangement where your dog resides with the trainer or at the training facility for a set period. When done properly, the set up allows for a concentrated training experience with a skilled professional who has the time to set up frequent training sessions to help build the desired behaviors.

Potential Benefits of Board and Train for Your Dog

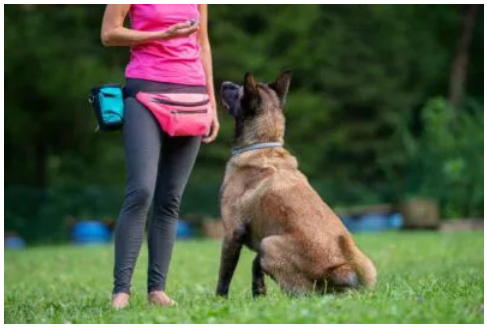
There are several important things to keep in mind when considering utilizing a board and train service. Ideally, you receive all the things in the "Pro" column:

- **Your dog receives consistent training**. Many households find it difficult to dedicate consistent time to training. In a board and train setting, training the dog is number one on the to-do list, not an additional task one attempts to juggle amongst work and responsibilities at home. Consistency goes a long way toward jump-starting a dog's learning and creating a solid foundation upon which you, as the owner, can continue to build.
- **Your dog learns quickly with a professional.** When a pet owner works with her dog under the guidance of a professional trainer, often, both species – the human and the dog – are learning new skills at the same time! A human working to conquer her learning curve can create moments of confusion for the dog that don't exist when a skilled professional trainer is at the end of the leash. Thankfully, dogs are forgiving and almost always eventually figure it out even when we humans might bumble our way through an exercise but minimizing those moments of confusion better supports the dog's learning.
- **Your dog is able to make positive breakthroughs in a new environment.** In the case of behavior issues, a change of scenery can be useful to help break patterns of behavior that might be heavily tied to the environment. Sometimes, the environment becomes such a strong trigger for an unwanted behavior, it's difficult to create opportunities to reinforce a more desirable behavior within the environment. Ideally, during the dog's time away, the trainer can help the dog develop alternate behaviors under similar circumstances so when the dog returns home, with the help of a little management and continue practice, it's easier for the dog to be successful.

The Potential Cons of Board and Train Arrangements

- **Finding the right program can be challenging.** Unfortunately, dog training is still an unregulated industry, and anyone can they are a dog trainer. If you don't carefully do your homework when choosing a board and train trainer or facility, at best you'll have spent money with little to nothing to show for it and, at worst, your dog may have been subjected to harsh training methods or unsafe conditions.
- **It's spendy.** Be prepared to spend a significant amount of money – typically in the thousands of dollars for a two-week program. You're not only paying for the trainer's time spent training your dog (which, remember, is frequent in this set-up), you're also paying for time spent caring for your dog daily.
- **You're not the one working with your dog.** We know, we know, you're thinking, "Duh. That's the point." But consider this: Training is a relationship-builder and the better relationship you have with your dog, the more successful the outcome. Dogs tend to work best for whomever spends the most time engaged in training. Just because your dog is responding wonderfully to the trainer doesn't mean the behavior will naturally carry over to you when your dog gets home.

How to assess a board-and-training facility



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Here's what to keep in mind when researching board and train options:

- **Get referrals from sources you trust.** If you search online, you will find countless reports of cruelty, abuse, and neglect occurring at boarding and training facilities. Some people have found their dogs in terrible condition or have been unable to retrieve their dogs at all. Don't rely on internet-based reviews; the stakes are too high. If you're working with a trainer you're comfortable with, ask if they offer board and train services or if they recommend anyone. Query friends and family to get honest, trustworthy references.
- **View the facility and watch some training in action.** If the board and train takes place at a dog training facility, find out when you can visit to observe some training in action. Does the facility look clean? Does it have a noticeable "doggy" odor? Are dogs barking endlessly? As you observe the training, watch the dog's body language. Does the dog appear comfortable with the trainer? If the trainer is working with a shy or fearful dog, does the trainer appear patient with the dog? If you're working with a private trainer who offers board and train services out of his home, you may not be able to tour the home, but you should be able to observe the trainer in action as he teaches classes or private lessons.
- **Talk about training methods.** Ask what training methods are used and what equipment will be used on your dog. Explicitly ask if aversive tools such as training collars ("choke chains"), pinch collars, or shock collars are used, even if the trainer says she uses positive-reinforcement training.
- **Be leery of guarantees and other claims that sound too good to be true.** It's a huge red flag if a board and train facility or private trainer states you can expect problem behaviors to be eliminated, or that your dog will be 100 percent reliable off-leash following the board and train program. Of course, you should expect to see progress – even significant progress depending on the issue – but, as we said, training a dog takes time, patience, and consistency, and if a trainer is claiming he can guarantee amazing results within the timeframe common for a board and train arrangement (typically two to four weeks), there's a good chance they're using punishment-based training collars in an attempt to quickly suppress unwanted behaviors.
- **Have clear expectations.** Make sure the trainer understands what behaviors you want to prioritize during the board and train time. The trainer should also help you understand what to expect from the dog at the completion of the program. The time in board and train should end with a few private sessions where the trainer works with you to understand how to continue with the new behaviors at home.

Is board and train worth it?

If you have the financial resources, know you're working with a professional you can trust and understand it's not a quick fix and you'll still need to invest some time and

effort into transferring the behaviors from the trainer to yourself – and working to maintain the dog's success – it can be a great way to jump-start your dog's learning.

It can be especially effective with young puppies where ensuring consistency means your dog is better able to learn correct behaviors from the start versus learning unwanted behaviors you'll need to fix later. As part of a board and train arrangement, the trainer can also help make sure your puppy gets out to safely experience the world during the critical socialization period, helping to create a confident dog.

As an alternative to board and train programs, consider working with a trusted trainer who can offer "day training." Like board and train, a trainer works with your dog in your absence, either picking the dog up from your home or working with the dog on your property. As a trainer, I've successfully offered this service to many clients looking for a training boost when they themselves are unable to commit as much time to training as they'd like. Day training is much less expensive – typically the same cost as a private lesson with the trainer – and you aren't without your canine friend!

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Stephanie Colman has been a contributor to Whole Dog Journal since January 2010, with multiple articles recognized by the Dog Writers Association of America. Colman has an extensive background in positive-reinforcement dog training, having spent more than 15 years teaching group and private training classes focused on basic manners, problem solving, sport-dog training, therapy dog prep, and more. She's also competed at high levels in a variety of dog sports including obedience, agility, Rally, hunt tests, lure coursing, and working trials. She holds a B.A. in Journalism and an M.A. in Mass Communication from California State University, Northridge, where she presently serves as a writer/editor on a strategic communications team.

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