

# Ethical Dog Training

The concept of applying an ethical approach to dog training and behaviour therapy is relatively new. It started to appear on the dog training landscape in conjunction with scientifically based advances in our knowledge of dog behaviour over the last twenty to thirty years.

Until scientific research started to question age old practices, nobody really understood what they were doing wrong or what the potential consequences might be. Training methods were seemingly passed down from generation to generation and although they generally produced results, there was little impetus to improve the methods, get better results or look at the subject from a welfare perspective.

Sadly some of these methods are still delivered today and their use is defended by some who believe the end justifies the means. Thankfully they are in a dwindling minority but while older books and research papers are still available they are used to support these deep-rooted practices.

Television programmes aimed at entertaining dog lovers often unwittingly help promote these scientifically discredited and unethical techniques. This is because programme producers may not know about contemporary welfare driven approaches or where to find the appropriately qualified people to present them, there will also be a reluctance to change a formula for a programme that is



*A relaxed and willing canine pupil*

popular and therefore lucrative. The other issue is that programmes have to fit into fixed time slots and much of the 'behind the scenes' activity is edited out, the resulting production portrays an apparently remarkable transformation of dogs from being destructive or aggressive and out of control to perfectly behaved pets in as little as half an hour at the hands of a charismatic presenter.

There are many useful, welfare-friendly, pieces of equipment available to help in training, known as training aids. However, also under this umbrella term are some that employ positive punishment and work on instilling anxiety or fear in the dog to make it behave. These include gadgets that squirt a disagreeable spray at the dog when they bark, shock collars, choke chains or prong collars, that press sharp points into the dog's neck, if they pull on the lead. Many of these are widely available and continue to be recommended by some trainers, although there are political moves to ban or at least seriously restrict their use.



**Prong collar**



# The Origins of Our Understanding of Dog Behaviour

Over the last twenty to thirty years scientific research has driven our understanding of animal behaviour, particularly domestic dog behaviour, forward at a phenomenal rate. It has challenged traditional beliefs and continues to demonstrate how old perceptions that have been passed on unquestioned for successive generations have been built on little more than folklore.

At the centre of almost all heated discussions about dog behaviour is the subject of dominant and submissive behaviour borne out of what is labelled 'pack theory'. It would seem that popular understanding of dog behaviour was based on observations of captive wolves, logic suggested that because they are genetically similar the behaviour of the dog's wild 'cousins' would offer reliable explanations for the behaviour of the pets in our homes.

Sadly this logic was flawed for the simple reason that the wolves that formed the basis of these theories were not exhibiting 'normal' behaviour due to the fact that they were being kept in unnatural circumstances and were being prevented from doing so.

In the wild wolves live in familial groups with up to three generations, often maintaining ranges covering hundreds of square miles, as the adolescents become adult, some will leave the group to start groups of their own

and will often roam huge distances to find a mate. The social dynamic within their group is one of cooperation, whether it is finding food or defending resources and raising young. They generally avoid human contact.

Captive groups are generally kept in enclosures that are so small as to be totally unrepresentative of a natural habitat, they are rarely a familial group with a frequent imbalance of ages or genders and even different sub species being kept together with no need to hunt at all.

Despite contemporary practices such as environmental enrichment and managed feeding regimes producing healthy specimens, the truly wild counterpart and therefore truly wild behaviour cannot possibly be replicated. Incidents of aggression are not uncommon and competition becomes a regular feature of observed behaviour.

The core false understandings were that survival was achieved by aggression and that their social group was structured around a strict hierarchy ruled by the fittest individual. This was then expanded to include the human element (owners) when considering the social group of the family pet dog.

Developing these false ideas further it was thought that in order to achieve a stable social group in the home setting, dog owners would have to demonstrate their right to 'lead the pack' and this should be done by a range of methods including eating before the dog, waiting before acknowledging the dog, always winning competitive games and even being prepared to punish unwanted behaviours, all in the name of reducing the dog's 'status'. In short, the owner had to demonstrate dominant behaviour because if they did not the dog would, and the home environment would be run by a dominant dog. Of course, not all dogs behave this way so they were categorised as submissive if they were not exhibiting such behaviours, in other words they lacked the drive to become the leader.





# How Does Our Understanding Affect Dog Training Methods?

**How someone explains a dog's behaviour may not seem like an important issue but it can have a direct impact on the training methods used. If the trainer is trying to counter the perceived ambitions of the dog to be dominant it may well be that the chosen approach will be to be more dominant than the dog, to show him that the trainer is 'in charge' in order for the dog to 'be respectful' of the trainer or understand who is 'in control'.**

To try and achieve this it will inevitably involve the use of coercive methods, this means the use of force or intimidation to some degree with the resulting inevitable fear, or anxiety for the dog. When a dog (or any animal, including humans) is in this emotional state, learning becomes suppressed and unintended behaviour may result. The dog may become aggressive, feeling the need to defend itself or generalise the training session to other similar situations and become fearful in unexpected circumstances.

Apart from the poor and unintended results, there are welfare and ethical issues to consider. How can it be right to cause any animal pain in order to motivate it to carry out your wishes when humane methods are not only available but produce better long term results?

This simplistic approach went unquestioned for decades and formed the basis for most dog training until the end of the twentieth century. As more detailed information about wild wolf behaviour became apparent and the topic of animal behaviour in general became more and more popular in scientific research communities it became increasingly evident just how unfounded the established ideas were.

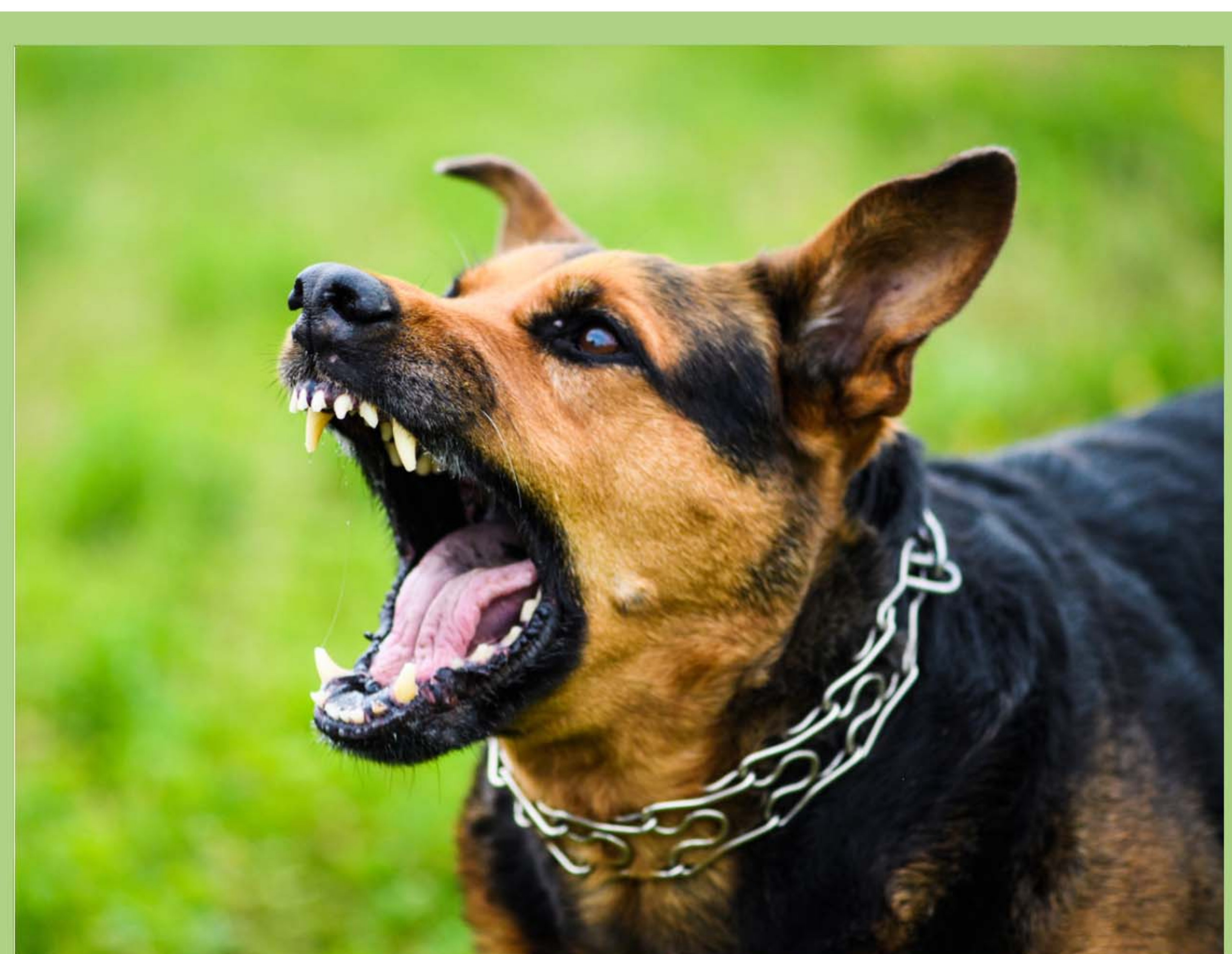
Since these early revelations the dog training and behaviour community has been divided. Many (most) have embraced the exposure of previous misunderstandings and are hungry for each piece of scientific research that unveils wider and deeper knowledge of the domestic dog's psyche. There are however, still a minority of 'old school' who resolutely resist such advances and spend time trying to justify, argue for and promote what they see as traditional methods. It is understandable that there is a certain reluctance to change their views, it is not in human nature to readily admit to being misguided, especially if it might have an adverse effect on business and therefore income. It might also mean having to return to studying.

The technical aspects of the psychological principles that under-pin good practice are complex and require structured, quality education, this is not a subject that can simply be learned through experience alone. Practical ability is, however, also very important and having studied the subject the student will then have to learn to apply that knowledge.

The standards applied by ABTC ensure that anyone who has qualified under their regime has undergone thorough education and strict assessment of practical ability. Their education and professional development also continues throughout their career.

Unfortunately there is still no legal requirement to comply with ABTC standards but this could only be a matter of time.

***Right: Dog wearing an outdated, harmful type of collar***





# Where Do You Find a Properly Qualified Trainer or Behaviourist?

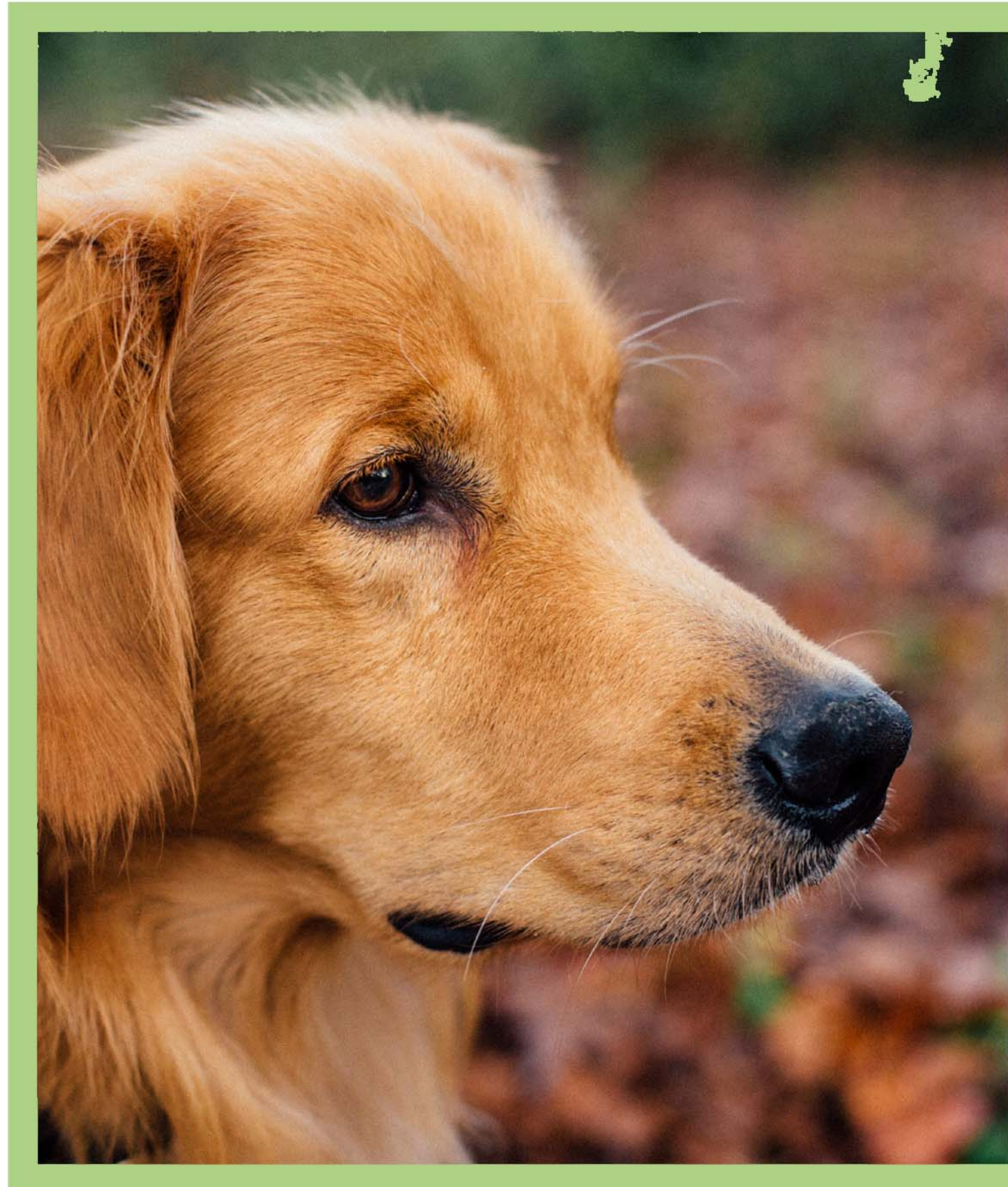
Since 2010 the Animal Behaviour and Training Council, with the support of the veterinary profession and the major animal welfare charities, has been working to get all those engaged in training animals, delivering classes or behaviour therapy to be assessed against rigorous standards.

Progress has been steady and many now qualify to display one of the prestigious logos demonstrating their level of expertise. Many organisations that train and represent training instructors and behaviourists have come forward to have their standards assessed as suitable and more are applying.

ABTC registers are displayed on the website so that vets, local authorities and pet owners can all be sure to find someone who is properly qualified to help with training issues or behaviour problems. These registers are also recommended by Defra.

ABTC is the only charity dedicated to promoting the welfare of animals undergoing training or behaviour therapy.

**If you are looking for someone to help you and your pet with training issues or behaviour problems, visit the Practitioner Directory on [www.abtc.org.uk](http://www.abtc.org.uk) to find a professional in your area.**



# ABTC

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