

Call them dog whisperers or dog listeners, some Singapore dog trainers say they can get naughty pooches to behave

Cheryl Faith Wee



Evan the greyhound was a naughty pooch. The 10-month-old black-and-white hound chewed on furniture. In fact, it would munch anything wood, leather or cloth. Worse, it would snap at owner Fiona

Lim, a 32-year-old director of business development. She and her husband, investment broker Jason Ong, 35, had to keep Evan tied up most of the time to stop him from wrecking their home in Serangoon.

When they took him out on leashed walks, it was nerve-racking as they were terrified that Evan might attack children at a nearby kindergarten.

Ms Lim says: "My dog was very destructive. I was very worried."

Two months ago, the Lims enlisted the help of dog listener Ricky Yeo.

Within a week of meeting him, Evan was transformed into a gentle canine. Mr Yeo, 44, guided its owners through non-violent methods that instill discipline, such as isolating their dog in the toilet when it had done something wrong.

It sounds like a scene out of dog whisperer Cesar Millan's popular TV show Dog Whisperer With Cesar Millan, in which he works his magic on dogs with behaviour problems.

Indeed, apart from Mr Yeo, there are a handful of dog trainers and whisperers in Singapore who claim that they can understand the psyche of dogs and who conduct behaviour therapy sessions for troubled pets.

They assess the dog's behaviour problems and guide the owner through non-violent steps to correct them.

The cost of each session varies, from about \$165 for two hours to \$300 for three hours.

Mr Yeo, who is president of animal welfare organisation Action For Singapore Dogs, has more than a decade of experience in handling dogs.

Three years ago, he attended a week-plus course in Britain conducted by dog listeners who practise the methods of renowned trainer Jan Fennell. She is the author of dog training books including The Dog Listener: Learning The Language Of Your Best Friend.

Since then, he has run the one-man-show The Dog Listener Consultancy, holding dog training and behavioural modification programmes.

He makes about three house calls every day to help dog owners. He says: "Every dog has a different personality but a lot of the time, it is about changing how owners act around it."

The phrase "dog whisperer" is said to have been coined by dog trainer Paul Owens in his book of the same name in the 1990s.

While Mr Yeo calls himself a dog listener, there is a dog whisperer here, Mr Sunny Chong, 43, who runs Sunny Chong Dog Training School. He has over a decade of experience as a canine trainer and has attended certificate courses for dog training in Australia.

He makes at least two house calls

daily. He says: "A dog whisperer understands the dog and gets into its mind to find out why it is behaving this way. Dogs are like children, there is a reason behind their misconduct."

One of his clients is Dr Daphne Ang, founder of veterinary clinic Vet Practice, who declined to reveal her age.

Kira, her year-old German shepherd, is one of the breeds required by the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA) to undergo basic obedience training.

Dr Ang hired Mr Chong as she felt that he understands canine behaviour and does not use forceful methods. She and Kira had eight one-hour-long sessions with Mr Chong which cost \$980.

Kira learnt basic obedience such as walking at her heel.

Dr Ang says: "I have been a vet for the past 17 years but the term dog whisperer is not that common here."

"Of course, there are some people whom dogs naturally take to. They understand and have a feel for dogs more so than others. My dog loved Sunny from the second session onwards."

The AVA says dog trainers and behavioural therapists do not have to be licensed here. But if they wish to train breeds listed as potentially aggressive or dangerous, they must be accredited by its panel of accredited dog trainers. There are 28 such trainers here, including Mr Yeo and Mr Chong.

Some trainers here say the terms "dog whisperer" and "dog listener" are just fanciful names.

Ms Angela Seow, 30, a trainer with dog training school Puppylove, says: "It seems more like a marketing tool. It doesn't matter what we call ourselves. We prefer to let our work do it for us."

She tries to understand why a dog behaves in a certain way and uses positive reinforcement methods and a reward-based system.

Part-time trainer Rodney Tay, 40, has been a franchisee of DogTech since 2009 and uses the methods of Australian dog whisperer John Richardson.

Although he does not consider himself a dog whisperer, Mr Tay uses the same gentle training approach.

Designer Coleen Lawless, 26, got him to train her four-month-old chow chow poodle. She says: "I was amazed by how Kaya responded to him and the way he gets her to follow him around. She definitely took a liking to him."

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Singapore dog listener Ricky Yeo (left) with the poodle and Labrador retriever that he is dog-sitting for customers.

CHEWING AND NIPPING POOCH

SundayLife! asks dog whisperer Sunny Chong and dog listener Ricky Yeo for advice on three common problems.

Chews shoes, furniture and household objects

Tip: Dogs often look for something to chew when they are teething.

For puppies between two and five months old going through the teething stage, get them a cloth or rope toy. Nylon, plastic or rubber toys are good for those six months and above. When you spot it chewing something it is not supposed to, say a stern "no".

Introduce the toy by clamping the dog by your side. Ease the toy gently into its mouth until it starts to chew on it. If done consistently, the problem can be resolved in about a week.

Pounces on you with its front legs

Tip: Dogs have to respect the person-

al space of family members. When a dog does this, ignore it or push it gently away.

Avoid kicking or pushing it roughly away with your hands as this might hurt it. Place your foot, thigh or hand on its body first before pushing it away.

Nipping

Tip: When dogs want to get their owners to play, they often use their mouth or their paws to catch your attention. Owners have a tendency to put their fingers into their dog's mouth and allow it to "play-bite".

This should be discouraged, especially when the dog is still a puppy because it can translate to nipping in adulthood.

If it nips at you, squeeze its mouth close, firmly but gently at the muzzle, and say "no". Release it after giving the command.