

Clicker Training Basics



What is Clicker Training?

- How it's used
 - Clicker training is a training technique based on positive reinforcement training principles. The clicker is a **marker** that communicates to the dog that he has done something you want him to repeat.
 - We pair the click with a reward the dog values (i.e. treat, toy, game) so that it comes to have the same value as the reward. This is called a conditioned reinforcer or secondary reinforcer.
 - The clicker acts like the shutter of a camera, taking a picture of that behavior for the dog. It speeds the dog's learning, because it is clear and precise in **marking** that moment of success.
- Clicker = Effective Two-way Communication
 - Sometimes a verbal marker, such as "YES!" is used instead of a clicker. Although a verbal marker can be effective, it is not delivered as consistently or precisely as the sound of a click.
 - The click means the same thing, all the time, no matter who clicks. The click doesn't carry emotion or tone of voice. It always conveys confidence.
 - Learning is faster because the brain instantly understands the click. It doesn't have to be processed to be understood.
 - The click has been shown to release dopamine into the dog's brain—naturally calming the dog down.
 - Learning is permanent—and FUN for the dog.

Clicker Basics

- Use the clicker for teaching new behaviors only.
- Click/Treat (C/T) the *presence* of desired behavior or *absence* of unwanted behavior (Operant Conditioning).
- The clicker can also be used to create positive emotional connections for the dogs with things they see, hear or smell (Classical Conditioning).
- Click *during* desired behavior while shaping (not after).
- Click only once and then treat.
 - Keep your reward hand empty and away from the treat pouch until AFTER you click.
 - "Pay" for EVERY click.
 - No talking!
- Shape by clicking and treating the slightest bit of behavior for a high rate of reinforcement. Build behaviors in increments, requiring more of the dog progressively.
- Add verbal cues during (progressing to *before*) the behavior when dog begins to demonstrate comprehension of the behavior.
- As behavior is proofed (the 3 D's: duration, distance, distractions), fade the clicker; still pay for every click when it is used.

Training Uses for the Clicker – just a few examples

- Quiet (no barking)
 - If the barking is caused by a stimulus (runners, other dogs, critters, etc.) C/T the *absence* of barking/vocalizing—the dog has to breathe sooner or later!
 - If barking is really bossy behavior, ignore/walk away from the dog until the barking stops; *then* C/T.
 - Add your quiet cue as you can tell the dog is about to take a breath, then C/T to give the cue meaning. Eventually use the cue pre-emptively and C/T if the dog inhibits barking.



- Counter Conditioning Negative Stimuli
 - Use the clicker as something the dog reacts negatively to is approaching; C/T rapidly as the dog looks at/smells/listens to that negative stimulus—regardless of their reaction.
 - Even if the dog doesn't initially take the treats, continue to offer/drop them by the dog.
 - Stop clicking and treating as the negative stimulus passes or fades. The dog learns that the presence of that stimulus causes good things to happen for him, so he begins to have positive associations for that stimulus.
- Desensitization to Handling
 - C/T while petting, touch feet and/or head teaches dog that good things happen when body part is touched.
 - Using the clicker allows you to gain more ground in a shorter period of time
- Free Shaping
 - Teach a dog any behavior by C/T small steps toward final behavior.
 - Example – Teaching a dog to stand inside a hoop may start with C/T for looking at the hoop, then C/T for walking towards the hoop, then C/T for putting 1 foot inside hoop, etc.
 - Benefits:
 - Provides enrichment for any dog
 - Fun for both dogs and people
 - Builds confidence
 - You can shape a dog to do just about anything

Practice Your Clicker Skills

- Timing
 - Watch sports and click in time with the action: as the baseball hits the catcher's mitt, as the tennis ball reaches its apex or hits the tennis racket, as the football is hiked or caught, etc.
 - Have fun with websites that build your hand-eye coordination:
 - <http://www.ferryhalim.com/orisinal/g2/dozen.htm>
 - <http://thedogpaddler.com/RandomUploads/Ball/ball.htm>
- High Rate of Reinforcement
 - Shape a dog to do a trick by breaking it down into very small component parts and progress the dog through the steps.
 - Keeps the dog engaged and experimenting to try to earn the click.
- Smooth Delivery
 - Have in mind what the behavior is you are looking for
 - Click when you see that desired behavior.
 - Take the treat out of the pouch AFTER you click—keep the reward hand empty and away from the pouch until you have clicked.
 - Feed the dog.
- Set your training criteria
 - Think through the progression ahead of time—know what you are looking for and the steps needed to get there.
 - Click and treat for the most basic step in the progression.
 - Move to the next step in the progression when the dog demonstrates compliance about 80% of the time.
 - Make the increments of progress small to help the dog build the behavior one step at a time.