

READY, SET, CLICK!

Introduction to Clicker Training



WHAT THE HECK IS CLICKER TRAINING?

ANOTHER GIMMICK?

Clicker training is a wonderful, precise and fun way to train your dog. It doesn't rely on force, nor does the clicker trainer have to rely on correcting errors, because the click tells the dog exactly what we want with surgical precision.

With clicker training, we can learn to be totally "proactive" and "catch the dog doing it right" as well as "set the dog up to do it right" so that learning is always focused on the positive and fun, non-stressful for the dog.

MARK THAT MOMENT OF SUCCESS!

The clicker itself is a "marker" that makes a bright, crisp sounding metallic "CLICK!" when the metal tongue is depressed. It works like the click of a camera button, to isolate a moment in time, and tells the dog exactly when it is doing something right.

We use markers all the time in our lives. Think about the last time someone scratched your back. When the scratcher hit the itchiest spot, what did you do? You likely gave a verbal "marker", "Ahhh!" to let the scratcher know she'd hit the right spot. You used a "marker" to deliver information, in the same way the clicker delivers information to the dog.

You "marked the moment" without words, but with a sound that told the scratcher all she needed to know: scratch more in this especially itchy spot. You could have clicked a clicker and delivered the same info. The clicker, like the "Ahhhh!" is a universal language every species can understand. We've been "marking moments" in dog training forever: this is not new.

But what's new is that we have, until recently, been focusing on marking the moments of ERROR instead of moments of SUCCESS. We pop the leash to tell the dog it's done something wrong or we use a verbal punisher to deliver that same information. We set the dog up to make mistakes that could be "corrected."

Science now gives us a different way to communicate with an animal, and one that works with every species from cockroaches to elephants. This can be quite liberating for pet owners who really don't like jerking on leashes, giving verbal reprimands, and punishing their dogs.

Not only is this liberating for pet owners, but dogs find clicker training so much fun, and often beg to have teaching sessions with the owner. The picture at the top of this article shows my dog, Peek, bringing me the clicker with hopes that I will begin a training session!

BYPASS WAR OF WILLS FOR A DANCE OF HARMONY

With clicker training, it's possible to teach any animal nearly anything --as Karen Pryor, the dolphin trainer who brought clicker training to the general dog training world explains, --"You can teach anything that the animal is physically and mentally capable of doing, and both you and your dog will have fun doing it."

When dogs are free to make mistakes to find a behavior that WILL be rewarded, they are free to initiate behaviors they think may be rewarded. This helps build problem-solving ability, and makes learning stress free and totally fun. Learning doesn't have to be stressful, boring, repetitive or painful to be effective.

In clicker training, learning becomes a dance of joy, rather than a war of wills. Canadian Clicker Trainer supreme, Sue Ailsby, talks about the handler "Leading the Dance." There is harmony in leadership, as opposed to dictatorship, no matter how benevolent.

It's easy to see why dogs enjoy clicker training so much, because they are controlling the speed of learning, and learning at their own pace, very incrementally. Every step is a fun problem to solve---how to get the human to click and treat them.

Clicker training gives us the opportunity to get the info to the dog in a non-threatening way, which enhances the dog's attention, focus and enthusiasm. That distinct, crisp sounding *CLICK* tells the dog exactly what they are doing right, at the exact moment they are doing it.

We can't say "Good Dog" fast enough to make it an effective and precise marker. So we get "fuzzy edges" when we use praise phrases to let the dog know what's right, especially with very precise behaviors. The clicker is not used *AFTER* the behavior, but at the exact moment the dog offers what is wanted, giving the dog a clear picture of what should be repeated to earn more clicks and treats.

MISTAKES ARE A "GOOD THING!"

In clicker training, we realize learning means making mistakes, and making choices. Some choices pay off in rewards, some don't. But those that don't pay off need not be painful or demoralizing.

We can't learn without making mistakes. It's normal, natural. Imagine you're teaching a child to walk. In those first unbalanced steps, the child makes many mistakes. He might lurch and fall many times before he finally figures out how to walk all the way across a room.

Do we think of punishing the child for stumbling and falling? Of course not! So why do we punish our dogs while they are learning new things? It's no more necessary than it is when coaching that child to learn to walk smoothly. When we stop thinking of "correcting" mistakes, and instead think of learning in terms of making mistakes to figure out what is right, then learning becomes a joy. It becomes stress-free. The animal, no longer afraid of being punished, begins to offer many behaviors to choose from. He becomes an active participant in training, a partner.

We don't have to force compliance, or to "command." There is no need for "or else." Before you begin imparting information to your dog via the clicker, you may find it helpful to "charge up the clicker" and get your dog to first understand that the click means something good is coming. He will not understand yet that it means you are marking a moment of excellence that you want him to remember. First, just click the clicker and toss a treat to the dog.

Use a delicious, soft treat--and a tiny one. Soft tiny treats are quickly ingested, and you don't have to wait while the dog chews, and the dog won't fill up so quickly. Even large dogs will work for treats the size of a pea!

Repeat this several times in rapid succession and soon your dog will be looking up at you in anticipation of that click and treat. He'll begin to realize that when he hears the click, it means a treat will immediately follow. At this point, you can begin pairing the click with a behavior the dog is offering you.

ATTENTION!

An easy behavior to start with is simple "attention." When your dog offers you eye contact, click and follow up with a treat. Do this all over the house and outside as well. Say your dog's name, and the moment he looks up at you, click and treat. This is also training the dog, because each time you pair calling the dog's name with a click and treat for having looked up at you, you have told the dog that looking at you when his name is called is a good thing.

This is also an important safety behavior. You wouldn't want your dog to be across a busy street, and when hearing his name called, comes running across that street to come to you. By clicking first for those attention behaviors, you are reinforcing that in an emergency, the dog will hear his name, stop and LOOK to you for further direction, but not move toward you.

This is also forming the information that the clicker "marks" a moment in time and that whenever the dog hears the click, what he was doing at that exact moment is what will earn him the treat. Timing the click is crucial: click too soon and you've reinforced a crouch instead of a sit. Click too late and you've reinforced kicking of the back legs instead of pottying in the correct spot outdoors.

IMPROVING YOUR CLICKER TIMING SKILL

Timing is everything, but fortunately it's a simple mechanical skill which can be learned. Practice by bouncing a tennis ball on the floor with one hand. Try to CLICK the moment the ball hits the floor with your other hand. Try 10 repetitions of this and see how many accurate clicks you get from the ten tries.

You might try clicking with the TV during scene changes, or while riding in a car when lights change. Be creative! There are so many ways to practice how to efficiently "mark a moment in time" and the more you practice this purely mechanical skill, the faster you will see results in your training efforts.

Think about the first time you tried typing. Felt pretty awkward, didn't it? But before long, you didn't even have to look at the keys, and it became a "default behavior" or something you just automatically did without thinking about it. It's the same with driving a car and steering. Once you get the relaxed feel of it, you do it effortlessly. So

it is with making the clicker work effectively. It's a mechanical skill, no different really, from learning to steer a car, type on a keyboard or brush your teeth without missing any crevices.

Practice your clicker timing online by shaping an animated pigeon inside a Skinner Box. Go to: <http://www.clickertales.com/clickertimingame.html>.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Clicker training uses a term called "shaping". This simply means we "capture" the dog doing something right, without luring or bribing the dog, and mark and reinforce it. We "shape" a behavior by clicking the moment it happens, and following up with a treat.

One example would be shaping the "sit." Let's presume you're standing up and your dog looks up at you. His neck will get strained before long, so he'll likely plop down naturally into a sitting position.

BINGO! This is the moment we have been waiting to "capture"---when the behavior is offered on its own, and we have an opportunity to click and treat the dog.

So, the dog looks up at you, sits down of his own volition, and the moment that butt hits the floor, you *CLICK* and hold out a treat so the dog has to move from that position and come to get his treat.

WHO'S TRAINING WHOM?

I love to wax anthropomorphically at times, imagining the dog just learning clicker training, and thinking, "Wow, is this totally cool or what? All I have to do is plant my fanny here on the floor and the silly human makes a funny sound and gives me a treat. Guess I got HER trained, huh?"

And indeed, the dog *IS* training us! He's training us to watch closely, observe behaviors, and be ready to capture the ones we want to see repeated.

When we "capture" behaviors offered freely like this, without luring the behavior, it's called "free shaping." However, you can also lure behaviors effectively, and you don't always have to wait to "capture" a behavior the dog offers in order to click and treat.

You can lure the dog into the behavior then mark the moment of success. Another way to teach a "sit" is to lure with a treat, pulling the treat over the dog's nose and head,

which will make the dog flex his spine and move automatically into a more comfortable sitting position.

When the butt hits the ground, the owner clicks and treats. The treat lure is faded quickly, after just a few repetitions, because the dog will quickly figure out that sitting means a click and treat is going to happen.

LURING AND BRIBING: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Fading food lures quickly is very important if you don't want to get the dog to work only in the presence of food. Luring too easily becomes bribery, and the dogs are very savvy enough to realize that they only need offer enthusiasm for doing a behavior when the food is present, because if they don't offer anything, sure enough, you'll likely get out the food to encourage them. Luring is great, bribery is problematic!

With a clicker, you can see that teaching the "sit" can be learned quickly, without having to physically touch the dog. No pushing down of the back end, or pulling with the leash. Just lure, and click when the dog is in position. I have taught a multitude of puppies to sit while I'm visiting the bathroom, for quick 30 second teaching sessions. I even have an article called "Training in the Loo!"

What the clicker does is remove the "fuzzy edges" for the dog. It tells him exactly when he's got it right, --at that exact moment in time---and he doesn't have to guess what it is he's being rewarded for doing.

An example of how effective that sharp "event marker" can be: Let's say you're trying to teach your dog to go outside to eliminate. You don't go out with him, but just open the door and let him out into the yard. When he eliminates, you open the door, and he comes bounding in for his treat and praise.

But what is it he thinks he is being praised for doing? Is it eliminating? Or could it be rushing to the door when he hears it opening? Or coming through the door? Wagging his tail? Those fuzzy edges make learning difficult, and can drag out the process much longer than need be.

Imagine the same scenario with a clicker. You go outside with the dog, let him sniff and when he starts to eliminate on his own, you are ready with the clicker. You wait until he's almost finished, but still urinating, and you CLICK and let him come to you for the treat. The dog understands exactly what he is being rewarded for doing.

If you use a verbal marker, such as the praise phrase "Gooood Dog!" you lose a bit of that edge that helps learning move along so quickly. By the time you get the phrase out,

the dog may have already finished urinating, have turned his head, wagged his tail, put his leg down, turned to sniff the spot, etc. The precise *CLICK* at the moment the behavior is happening is what makes learning happen at warp speed. All those fuzzy edges are made crisp for the dog, and he doesn't have to guess which behavior he's being rewarded for doing.

This is why the clicker is such a powerful tool in training long, complicated chains of behaviors. The clicker allows us to teach each "link" of that chain separately before moving on to the next, and then the chain is complete.

TV, MOVIES, ZOOS

Imagine you're training your dog for a TV commercial. You have been told your dog will have to move away from you, go over to a couch, jump up on it, grab the TV controls, hop over the back of the couch, and bring the control to the kid eating the ice-cream cone instead of the dad who asked the dog to get it.

Let's assume that, as it often happens on a set, the director changes his mind during the shoot and decides the dog will now run over to the window sill, grab the TV controls, run to the dad, see the kid with the ice cream cone in the other room, then pivot around and take the TV control to the kid.

You had 2 weeks to teach your dog the whole sequence of events you were told would be required for the shoot, but you now have 15 minutes to teach a whole new sequence while on the set. Time is money, and you have to get it done in the most efficient way possible, while keeping the dog's enthusiasm high.

How do you do it? With a clicker, you can build new links very rapidly, put them together long enough to get the shoot done, and never bother putting each link or the whole behavior "on cue" or attach any words to it.

Clicker training is used extensively in the movie and TV industry because it is fast, accurate and the dogs work with great enthusiasm and an upbeat attitude. All this shows on film, and the dog who is forced and heavy handed with punishment into performing the behaviors will not have the kind of "watch me" attitude needed to make the spot work, to make it compelling.

Clicker training is also used extensively in Zoos, wild animal parks and marine mammal facilities. What works for dogs works equally well with any animal with a brain stem. Essentially, with little adaptation, you can train a whale or a giraffe or a fish or a chicken pretty much the same way you can train a dog.

It's pretty impossible to physically punish an animal who outweighs you by several tons. Or an animal that can swim away. But with that precision "event marker", such as a clicker or whistle---you can accurately communicate what will earn a reinforcement for the animal without stressing the animal or correcting errors made.

DANCES WITH CUE WORDS

Traditional training instructs us to attach a word "command" as we are teaching the behavior. We command "SIT" and push the dog's rump down, or pull up on the leash or collar, and eventually the dog comes to understand that that word means sit. But it's a slow way to teach, compared to the science of "shaping" that behavior.

When we attach a word BEFORE the dog understands the behavior, ---the "cue" or "command", as traditional training refers to the signal, we are only adding unnecessary noise which serves to distract the dog. The word means nothing at that point, and it's an unnecessary distraction.

If we wait until the dog is already offering the behavior each time we pull out the clicker, then the dog will be in a non-stressed frame of mind to receive the information. Once the dog is offering that sit behavior over and over, we know it's a good time to "attach the cue word or signal."

So, let's say our dog is now sitting on his own, each time you pull out the clicker. The cue word is then added just BEFORE the click. It's added just BEFORE the click because the dog is at that moment in a state of active reception, listening and watching for direction. Once the cue is given just before the click for 20-30 repetitions, the dog usually begins to understand that the word means they should perform that behavior.

COMMUNICATING WITH ALIENS

It would work the same way for humans if we were to meet a being from another planet who spoke a different language. If "FLOMP" meant "to sit" in the alien language, how could the alien teach us that without physically pushing us into a chair while saying "FLOMP?"

Suppose the alien has a clicker and a bag of something you like--let's say five dollar bills. The alien allows you to try to find out what he wants, so that you can get the bag of money. You first raise your arm, but no click comes. Then you lift your leg. No click.

But then you step--just take one step toward the chair, and the alien clicks and tosses you a five spot. You just realize that when you stepped, you got reinforced, but when you only waved your arms or shook your leg, nothing happened. So you take another step.

And get another click and another fiver. SO you take another step, and soon you're right in front of the chair.

You're already \$30 richer, and you think this is a pretty darned good game, with better odds than blackjack! When you get to the chair, the alien doesn't click. You reach out and touch the chair and still, no click. You kick it with your leg. No click. You sit down in it, and CLICK/jackpot--the alien throws you a whole handful of \$5 bills! Wowwww, whatta game!

The alien then moves the chair a foot and says nothing. He still holds the bag of money and the clicker. You realize that sitting is what you must do to get more money, so you take a step toward the chair. At that first step, the alien says "FLOMP" then clicks and gives you a five. Each step you take the alien says "FLOMP" and quickly clicks, and gives you a five.

You get to the chair and begin to lower your body into the seat, and the alien says "FLOMP" and clicks, gives you a handful of fives. You realize FLOMP means "sit in the chair" and you readily offer this behavior each time you hear the cue word "FLOMP" from the alien. You have paired the word with the behavior.

This is how the clicker trainer adds the cue for the dog to understand it in a simple, non-stressful way. Not before the behavior is learned, but after it's eagerly performed. To a dog, a piece of kibble can be a dollar bill, a piece of cheese a five dollar bill and a piece of nuked garlic chicken a ten dollar bill. Food is a glorious motivator, highly valued to most dogs!

When training new behaviors, you use one click and one treat. Each time you click, you offer a treat. To click without offering a treat is not only confusing to the dog, but lying to it. It breaks the contract. The click promises a treat is coming as well as marks a moment you want the dog to remember. If you click and not offer a treat, you are weakening the effectiveness of the clicker, breaking the contract you both agreed on.

TAKE IT ON THE ROAD!

Now, that does not mean that for the rest of your life you have to click and treat to get a dog to offer behaviors, or have a clicker velcroed to your body. You fade the clicker as the behavior becomes generalized in every environment,---indoors facing north, south, east, west, in every room, then by adding distractions, then moving into more and more distracting environments until it is generalized in all environments. The one click=one treat is for the beginning.

You can begin asking for more than one repetition of a behavior before you click and click for only the BEST of those behaviors, once the dog knows the behavior well. The term for this is "variable reinforcement" and simply means that we don't have to reinforce every behavior, but can gradually ask for multiple behaviors before clicking and treating the very BEST attempts.

Slot machines work on the "variable reinforcement" theory: Obviously, we don't get a payoff every time we put our quarter in the slot machine. But because we HAVE gotten a payoff before, and suspect we may again, we keep stuffing those quarters in, in hopes that the next pull of the lever might give us the bells and whistles (the marker) and the payoff (treats).

You can also train complicated behavior chains--such as the retrieve--with a clicker very quickly. When taught in small increments, the clicker gives you a way to isolate each link and perfect the response before having to move on to the next link.

TAKE BABY STEPS!

The clicker is also wonderful for teaching a nice solid down-stay. In traditional command-based training, the dog is punished for breaking the stay. In clicker training, if a dog breaks, we realize it's a handler error, not the dogs! WE have asked too much of the dog too quickly. For instance, if our dogs are doing a nice 5 second down stay, we don't then jump to asking for 10 seconds.

We move up incrementally, reinforcing for 5 second stays, 6 second stays--increasing in very small steps the amount of time we are asking for that behavior to be performed.

SHORT SESSIONS ROCK!

Incrementally, we can set the dogs up for success and mark and reinforce the behaviors we want: that quiet, long down stay. With clicker training, long grueling training sessions are not needed. They are also not desirable. Short, 3-5 minute sessions spread throughout a day work splendidly.

Informal training sessions like this are great fun for the dog and the handler! I train a lot in the bathroom, on the sofa, in bed or while I'm waiting in the car in the bank line. I keep clickers in every room to "catch" cute behaviors I want to eventually put on cue--like the cute puppy bow my young Papillon offers each time he rises from sleep. I keep treats--like a can of cat "Pounce" treats in every room next to my clicker. That way I'm always ready to "capture" a moment in time.

Clicker training is FUN for both dog and handler, and dogs begin to enjoy the challenge of "making their owners click and treat them." There are an abundance of excellent resources for learning more about clicker training online. The newest entry into the clicker training book world is a total gem, and should be on every dog owner's bookshelf. I can't praise this book enough, and only wish I had written it myself.

GREAT "GET STARTED" BOOK!

The book is "Clicking with Your Dog--Step-By-Step in Pictures" by Peggy Tillman, and is a step-by-step pictorial guide to getting started. It's simple, easy to follow, and marvelous for learning clicker training quickly. There are no long blocks of text to follow, and it's easy to follow for every type of learning style. Children can follow the pictures easily. Or, impatient readers such as myself, who live with Attention Deficit Disorder: the book is written to make following it as simple and compelling as possible. And the pictures are TERRIFIC!

"Clicking with Your Dog" is available in all the major bookstores, and also on some wonderful dog-related online stores such as Dogwise at <http://www.dogwise.com> or Sit Stay Go Out store at <http://www.sitstay.com> . If I could put one dog training book in every public library, in every pet supply store, this would be the one I'd choose, hands down. Published by Sunshine Books, it's also available on Karen Pryor's website at <http://dontshootthedog.com> .

This is one of the most often recommended "get started" books on the largest clicker training discussion list on the web, www.clickersolutions.com, a website I also love visiting for the wealth of excellent articles and posts on positive reinforcement training.

To find a clicker training teacher in your area of the world, point your browser to Marge Morgan's geographical list of clicker trainers at <http://www.clickerteachers.net>

Whether you're training your family pet, a service animal, a therapy animal, performance dog, or for the show ring, clicker training can make the journey fun and precise, a dance of harmony for the dog and the human.