

Clicker Training - Getting Started

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Part I: How to Use a Clicker

Introduction

In Part I of this two-part article you will learn how to handle a clicker and practice good clicker mechanics. In Part II, you will learn how to teach your dog a simple behavior using clicker training.

Supplies Needed

You will need a clicker, two cups and a handful of dry beans.

What is Clicker Training?

Clicker training is a type of reward-based (a.k.a. "positive reinforcement") training. It derives its name from the fact that a hand-held, plastic device called a "clicker" is used to communicate with an animal during training. The clicker produces an audible marker signal that is used to indicate to the animal exactly which behavior (s) will be rewarded.

For an animal to associate a reward with a behavior and therefore be motivated to repeat the behavior he needs to know exactly which behavior will earn rewards. Since rewarding an animal during performance isn't always practical, a click or other marker signal is used to "bridge" the gap between the behavior and the reward so that the animal makes the correct association.

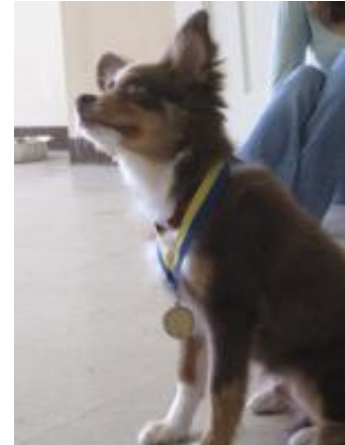
The click-click sound of the clicker communicates, "Yes, that's right!" at a precise moment in time. Other sounds, including the exclamation, "Yes!" can be used as marker signals, but a clicker produces a unique and consistent sound, devoid of any emotional inflection.

A clicker is only used during teaching, not performance. Once an animal has learned a specific behavior, clicking is no longer necessary or appropriate since the animal has learned which behavior (s) will be rewarded. Positive reinforcement training works because animals repeat what is rewarding and don't repeat what is not rewarding.

In clicker training, the cue is taught after the animal has learned a behavior. Once a behavior is "on cue," that is, the animal is reliably responding to the designated cue the marker signal is eliminated and reinforcement is put on a "variable" schedule that includes non-food rewards such as play.

The Clicker

There are two general types of clickers - box clickers and button clickers. Neither one is better than the other. Each can be used effectively to train an animal. Generally a button clicker produces a softer sound, which may be helpful for animals that are "sound sensitive." A button clicker can also



be used for hands-free clicking. The clicker can be placed under your foot when both hands are needed for training.



A clicker consists of a metal tongue inside a plastic casing that when depressed, makes a click-click sound. One click consists of a single depression and release of the metal tongue to produce a click-click sound.

A plastic wrist coil or piece of string looped through the tab at one end of the clicker can facilitate handling and keep the clicker readily accessible. There is no "right" way to handle a clicker. You will find what works best for you! Generally speaking, the clicker is held in the hand that is not dispensing treats, but this may not always be the case.

Clicker Mechanics

Before getting started with your dog (or other animal), it is important to practice holding and manipulating the clicker.

Don't worry if you are a bit awkward at first - we all are! It gets easier with practice, like everything. To get used to clicking to mark a behavior, stand somewhere out of hearing range of your dog (or other animal you are training) where you can see a lamppost or other narrow upright landmark and traffic. Hold your clicker in your hand and depress and release the metal tongue (or button if you have a button clicker) as you observe vehicles pass by the lamppost.

You may wonder which part of the vehicle to watch pass the lamppost. Do I click all vehicles or just cars? Do I click when vehicles pass in front of the lamppost or only when they pass behind? If so, good questions! Pick any point on the vehicle you desire, but be consistent. The more precise and observant you are, the more precise your training and your dog's responses will be! However, don't worry if you aren't precise yet. You will be surprised at how much your dog will learn, even if you click at the "wrong" time.

Here's an important caveat to remember: it is important to always deliver a treat after each click, even if you click at the wrong time. This keeps the clicker reliable as a predictor of a reward.

Once you're comfortable clicking vehicles passing a lamppost, it's time to try your skill at handling treats. One way to practice this is with two cups and some dry beans. Pour some beans into one cup. Have someone click for you to practice this exercise. After each click, move your "treat hand" to the cup with the beans, pick up a single bean and drop it into the other cup. It is very important to avoid moving your treat hand until after the click so that the click remains the predictor of a reward for your dog, not your hand movement.

Keep your body, including your treat hand still and stand (or sit) in a neutral position. Keep your treat hand out of your treat bag until after you click to avoid creating an unintended cue for your dog's behavior.

Keep your treats out of sight so your dog is working for rewards rather than bribes! When an animal works for bribes, he not only focuses more on the bribe than what he is doing to earn it, but he may refuse to work without a bribe!