

# Clicker Training. What is it?

## *Courtesy of Animal Info Publications*

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### Clicker Training - Introduction

Clicker training is about far more than simply using a clicker in training. While an important component of clicker training is the use of a marker signal, key philosophical and scientific principles of learning really define "clicker training."

This article will describe

1. the defining characteristics of clicker training
2. how clicker training differs from other types of training
3. the uses of clicker training
4. the advantages clicker training offers over other types of training



### Defining Characteristics of Clicker Training

#### ***Clicker training is a type of reward-based training.***

Clicker training is a type of positive reinforcement, or reward-based training which includes the use of a marker signal. A marker signal is a signal given to an animal at a precise moment in time to pinpoint exactly which behavior, or part of a behavior will be rewarded. The signal bridges the gap between completion of the desired behavior and delivery of the reward so that the animal knows which specific behavior is being rewarded.

#### ***Undesired responses are ignored.***

While most animal training includes some degree of positive reinforcement, clicker training is unique in that it is focused on positive reinforcement and excludes correction. Desired responses are marked and rewarded, and incorrect or undesired responses are ignored, never corrected. The reason this works is because animals, like most human beings repeat what they find rewarding and do not repeat what they do not find rewarding.

#### ***Clicker trainers use negative punishment.***

Clicker trainers do use a form of punishment called negative punishment, which consists of withholding or withdrawing a reward or reinforcement to stop unwanted behavior, but the overarching principle is to set the animal up for success by 1) using a high rate of reinforcement, and 2) adjusting performance criteria to the animal's responses to keep him challenged but not frustrated. The failure of an animal to respond as desired or expected is interpreted as a need to re-evaluate the training plan rather than correct or punish the animal.

#### ***Animal and trainer work as a team.***

In clicker training animals are voluntary and active participants in the learning process. Training is animal-driven as much as it is trainer-driven, and consists of a dynamic process of two-way

communication between animal and trainer. Each animal is an individual and progresses at his own rate of learning with an individualized training plan.

***Clicker training is based on the science of operant conditioning.***

Clicker training is a sort of experiential learning in which an animal is encouraged to think, make choices and experiment. In a nutshell it is operant conditioning, or learning through trial and error in which the animal discovers for himself what works to earn desired consequences. As with people this sort of kinesthetic learning or learning by doing may be what promotes the long term retention and enthusiasm for what has been learned through clicker training.



***Clicker trainers capture and shape behavior.***

Clicker trainers use techniques such as capturing and shaping. "Capturing" is a technique whereby a spontaneous behavior is marked with the sound of a click or other marker signal and then rewarded. "Shaping" is a dynamic process in which an animal is rewarded for successive approximations of a goal behavior. It is a process generally used to train more difficult or complex behaviors.

***Body movement and food luring are minimized.***

In clicker training, body movement and vocalization are minimized to keep communication as clear and "clean" as possible. If any movement prompts are used, they are faded as quickly as possible so they don't become part of the cue. For example, luring with a food treat may be used to speed up the initial teaching phase of new behavior such as "down," but any remnant of a hand gesture is quickly eliminated, and luring is done with a target stick rather than food whenever possible.

Food should be used cautiously and judiciously to avoid it becoming a distraction. If an animal is looking at or following food, he is more likely to be focused on the food than what he is doing to earn the reward. Food is kept out of sight during training and delivered only as a reward rather than being used as a bribe. This not only facilitates learning, but also prevents creating an animal that will only work for food.

***Clicker trainers teach cues rather than commands.***

One of the key differences between clicker training and other types of training is that clicker trainers teach "cues" rather than "commands." Cues are opportunities for reinforcement whereas commands are orders. Both cues and commands give direction to an animal, but cues tend to generate far more enthusiasm and tend not to degenerate over time. Cues are taught after the animal has learned the behavior, whereas commands are typically taught at the same time a behavior is taught. Orders require an animal to obey, whereas cues invite an animal to participate.

***The behavior is taught before it is named.***

An important aspect of clicker training is how and when to teach the name of a behavior. In clicker training the name of the behavior is taught after the behavior has been learned. Training only proceeds to the next step once the animal, advancing at his own rate of learning has demonstrated that he truly understands what has been taught as evidenced by a high percentage of correct responses in a relatively short period of time.

***Clicker trainers use a high rate of reinforcement.***

Another distinguishing feature of clicker training is trainers aim for a high rate of reinforcement. A high rate of reinforcement not only facilitates learning, but it serves as an indicator that the training plan is on target and learning is taking place. Later on, when an animal shows that he understands what is being taught the reinforcement schedule is changed to a variable schedule, meaning that the animal receives food at irregular intervals, usually for better than average performance. Also, secondary reinforcers such as play are added to the mix of food and praise rewards.

**Clicker Training - Summary of Differences Between Clicker Training and Other Types of Training**

Clicker training is unique in that it is the most science based form of animal training. The differences include 1) the use of cues rather than commands, 2) the absence of correction, 3) minimization of body movement and vocalization during, 4) the use of verbal cues rather than hand signals in initial training, 5) the use of rewards with minimization of food luring, 6) the use of capturing and shaping, 7) teaching the name of the behavior after the behavior is learned, and 7) using a high reinforcement rate in the initial stages of training.

**Uses of Clicker Training**

There are many more principles and practices involved in clicker training, enough to fill a book or several books, but suffice it to say that clicker training is a precise and sophisticated, yet simple and versatile way to train animals of virtually any species, not just dogs. It has been used successfully to train marine mammals, cats, horses, sheep, rats, rabbits, birds and even fish! Guide Dogs for the Blind in California uses clicker training to train service dogs, and clicker training is being used to facilitate animal care and feeding in zoos. Clicker training is used at wildlife education centers such as Wolf Park in Battle Ground, Indiana, and it is used in behavior modification of domestic, as well as wild animals to treat fear, anxiety and aggression.

**Advantages of Clicker Training**

Clicker training is fast and effective with long-lasting results. Animals that have been taught with clicker training have an obvious zest for learning and since they have "learned to learn," acquire new skills very quickly. There is no potential for harm as in other forms of training that incorporate the use of aversive stimuli or dominance maneuvers, and even with user-error and improficiency, animals learn! Clicker training is a highly effective system of animal training that fosters two way communication between animal and trainer and deepens the human-animal bond. Its usefulness is only limited by the physical ability of the animal being trained and the skill and imagination of the trainer!