



An Introduction to Clicker Training

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What is Clicker Training?

Clicker training is a type of training in which you use a marker (clicker) to indicate to a dog that it has done something right, and that a reward is coming. It is a teaching method based on positive reinforcement, or reward. Dogs, like all animals, will do what works. Behaviors that are rewarded will be repeated, and clicker training gives you a great opportunity to reinforce appropriate behaviors your dog does. It is widely used today for teaching anything from everyday manners, to service dog work, to dog sports, to treating severe behavior problems.

Benefits of Clicker Training

- A clicker offers a clear, consistent sound for the dog. It sounds the same every time, unlike the changing tones and volume of a human's voice. It is also a distinct sound separate from a human voice, and is often more easily recognizable for the dog because of how much we talk at, and to, our dogs.
- It allows you to develop better timing in rewarding the right behavior. It also allows you to mark the right behavior from a distance, so that if you can't reward right away the dog still understands what the right behavior was.
- Used properly, it produces reliable behavior very quickly.
- It is extremely dog-friendly. There is no force, pushing, pulling, prodding, or punishments. Clicker training is all about rewarding the right thing, and the dog becomes a willing, active learner rather than a passive participant. Dogs get excited at being able to figure things out and knowing how to get rewarded.
- It works to build a strong relationship with your dog. You become the most interesting thing to a dog, rather than the environment, and you become more relevant to your dog (which is a huge problem many owners face – being irrelevant).
- Great mental stimulation for dogs. Often dogs are lacking in activities to engage their brain, and often boredom and lack of things to do is what leads dogs to unwanted behaviors. A few minutes of clicker training can be as fulfilling (or more) than a half hour of running. Dogs need to keep their minds busy! A tired dog is a well behaved dog.

Using a Clicker

This is the clicker



To use a clicker properly is pretty simple. It follows three basic rules:

- Get the behavior
- Mark the behavior
- Reward the behavior



It needs to happen in this order in order for learning to take place. So you get the behavior you want, then you mark it (Click!), then you reward it. Once you reward it you start the process again. Once you have done this enough times so that your dog is offering the behavior freely, you can add a fourth step – naming it. At this point you will give your cue, get the behavior, click, and then reward.

Cue - □Behavior - □Mark - Reward.

Eventually, once the behavior is on cue, and you can get the behavior simply by asking with your cue word, you will no longer need to use the clicker as the dog will respond to the cue itself. It begins to look like this:

Cue - Behavior - □Reward

Over time, when the behavior becomes well understood, you don't have to reward every time. But in the beginning it's best to reward each time so that you are sure the behavior is strong. You can even begin to use life rewards (meals, attention, going for a walk, going outside, a special toy, etc) as the reward. Using life rewards for good behavior will go a long way to a happy, mutual relationship between you and your dog.

Clicker Tips

You must give a reward every time you click. For every click, there is a reward. Even if you click by accident, or click the wrong thing, it must be followed by a reward so that it remains effective.

The clicker is not a remote control! Click when your dog performs the behavior you want, not before you have the behavior. Don't use the clicker to get the dog's attention.

The best learning occurs in short sessions. 5-7 minutes several times per day is much more effective than one long training session. Most puppies require very short sessions (3-5 minutes) as their attention spans are very short.

Don't name a behavior until you are sure your dog will do it. Naming it too early can lessen the effect of the cue, and slow down training.

A marker word can be used in place of the clicker, if a clicker is too difficult or you don't have a clicker handy. Remember, a marker word must be taught just like the sound of the clicker. It should be consistent and easy to remember, and it should be a noise or word that you do not use in everyday speech.

Use the smallest treats you can that will still be effective. That way you have the opportunity to give many rewards without filling your dog up. For instance, break a cookie into ten pieces so you can use it as ten rewards instead of one. The smaller, the better. You can even use part of your dog's daily meal for training to prevent weight gain.

Catch your dog doing something right! So often we are wrapped up in all the "bad" things that our dogs do, that we forget that when they aren't doing something "wrong", they are giving us a huge amount of "right". Acknowledge that! If you notice your dog is sitting nicely rather than jumping, reward it! If you notice your dog lying politely on its bed, reward it! If your dog stops what it is doing and orients towards you, reward it! We don't let our dogs know when they are doing the right thing nearly often enough, and in a lot of cases we can prevent many problems and encourage good habits simply by noticing when they get it right.



There is sometimes a misconception with clicker training in which it is thought that you must carry a clicker around with you forever. This is not true. A clicker is used for the learning phase only - once the behavior is learned, is given a cue word, and then practiced, the clicker can be removed, and the dog will respond to the cue word (which of course you will still reward from time