

Frequently Asked Questions about Clicker Training

With permission of Karen Pryor and Melissa Alexander
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1835 Oak Haven Plantation Rd., Osteen FL 32764-8872

bestpaw@bestpaw.com www.bestpaw.com 407-321-1006

The Clicker Trainer's Goal:

*Authority without domination * Love without subservience * Respect without fear*

What is Clicker Training?

"Clicker training" is dog trainers' slang for a science-based technique of training behavior with positive reinforcement and a marker signal, the sound of a plastic clicker. You pick a desirable behavior and "click" it, as it is happening. The click tells the pet exactly what it did to earn the food, praise, petting, or toy that follows.

Dogs (& cats!) quickly learn to repeat whatever they were doing when they heard that click. By clicking various small actions you can "build" the final behavior – heeling, retrieving, greeting visitors politely, etc. – step by step.

Clicker training uses this distinct and consistent signal to mark a desired behavior in real time and then follows that signal with a motivating reward. Because animals understand precisely which action earned the click and their reward, they learn new behaviors quickly, easily, and enthusiastically.

Can I use other rewards along with or instead of food?

Food is the most popular reward, but anything your dog loves can be used as a reward. Throwing a tennis ball or a quick game of tug are both highly motivating rewards. If you would like to use food treats, be sure that your tidbits are especially yummy (tiny bits of hotdogs, about the size of a pencil eraser for example). Train before or instead of one of your dog's regular mealtimes.

Will my dog get fat if I feed him every time I train him?

No. Tiny pieces of food are used as treats. Small is important because you want your dog to be able to eat it and be ready to "play clicker" some more. Clicker training is often great exercise and is highly stimulating.

Does clicker training require special skills?

Clicker training is a bit like playing the children's game "Hot & Cold" with your pet. It requires no physical strength or skill beyond the ability to press the clicker; and yet, with well-timed clicks, you can communicate exactly what you want your pet to do. Everyone in the family – children and adults- can participate and share in the fun both with puppies and adult dogs.

Is a lot of experience required to clicker train successfully?

Absolutely not. (Sometimes it even gets in the way). Clicker training is easy to learn with the right instructions. A part of clicker training that may take some practice is timing the clicks to capture the exact behavior you are seeking. But don't worry, clicker training is so forgiving and so much fun for everyone that you don't have to worry about mistakes. They won't interfere with the training in the long run. Breeders can send puppies home that are already "clicker wise" and home ready

Does clicker training take much time?

Basic obedience, good manners and fun games can be easily taught even in busy family households, where time is short and schedules hectic. Training can be woven into daily activities including walking to school, making dinner or even watching TV.

Can't I just use my voice? Why is clicker training better than positive attention, praise, food or other training methods?

Lots of important reasons. The click pinpoints the behavior exactly so your dog will learn desirable behavior amazingly quickly -- often from one, two or three clicks. The clicker provides a consistent, unemotional marker so your dog always receives the same information. The clicker is also distinct from other signals in the environment.

The information the click provides is retained i.e. behavior is remembered from one training session to the next, so training sessions can be short and flexibly designed. Also, unlike word cues clicker training does not convey emotionally-loaded approval or disapproval to the animal, it is simply information the dog can use to earn a reward or try again.

Clicker training doesn't rely on punishment, force, aversive methods, sprays, or choke collars to get results, and it is the only method of training we know of that is safely and effectively used with puppies even weeks old.

How do pets feel about this new method?

Pets LOVE clicker training. Instead of learning, reluctantly, how to avoid your displeasure by changing behavior, they learn, happily, how to please you by doing things that make you click. It doesn't matter what kind of pet, or how old it is. Dogs, from old-timers to little puppies, soon start offering the behaviors they learned, as a way of asking you for what they need. It's a thinking game for the pet: "What can I do NEXT, to earn my treats?"

Can a dog that has been trained "traditionally" be "crossed over" to clicker training?

Absolutely! Cross-over trainers are often amazed at the change that comes over their dogs when they switch to clicker trainer. Previously hesitant and shy dogs become enthusiastic and creative learners. To try clicker training with a dog previously trained with traditional methods, don't begin with a behavior the dog already knows -- try something completely new and pick something light hearted and fun.

Can I clicker train the dog I rescued from a humane organization?

Yes! Most dogs are surrendered to shelters for behavioral issues. Clicker training is a fast, humane and enriching way of integrating your pet into a new home and fixing or avoiding behavioral problems

What about aggressive behavior?

Clicker training can be highly effective in calming aggression and giving a fearful dog confidence. *Click to Calm: Healing the Aggressive Dog* by Emma Parsons (KPCT: 2005) is packed with innovative and simple solutions for helping any dog to change its patterns of aggressive behavior with a clicker and positive reinforcement.

What results should I expect and when?

We often talk about "the lightbulb moment." It is the moment when your dog and you connect through the sound of the clicker. Communication has been established and it is as exciting for the animal as it is for the trainer. Most dogs will have the light bulb moment -- you can see it in their eyes -- in lesson one!

Teaching fun but simple behaviors like shaking hands or coming when called can be accomplished in one or two sessions. More complex behaviors can be trained a piece at a time, building or shaping the action over a series of sessions. For example, teaching your dog to find the TV

remote control may take several sessions, yet each session will only be 5-15 minutes long!

What is the difference between a primary & a conditioned (secondary) reinforcer?

A primary reinforcer is anything the subject will work to get – that is, anything the subject finds desirable, whether it seems worthwhile to someone else or not, like food; attention; patting; affection; chewing gum; loud noises (small boys are fond of loud noises, often) or whatever. A secondary reinforcer is an initially meaning-less signal or stimulus that stands for one or more of the primary reinforcers. In other words, the term is synonymous with the term “conditioned reinforcer.”

How is the clicker used in a training session?

Skinner's research showed that the more frequently a behavior is reinforced, the more often that behavior will occur. Any reinforcer, unconditioned or conditioned, selectively increases any behavior it follows, which is how you get targeted behaviors to increase while behaviors that are not reinforced will decrease.

If you are teaching your dog to sit & the reinforcer is delivered only when the dog is sitting, it will tend to sit until you deliver the reinforcer, whether a conditioned reinforcer such as a click or an unconditioned reinforcer such as food. If you progressively delay delivery of the reinforcer while the dog is sitting, the dog will sit for longer periods of time because you are reinforcing longer, rather than shorter, sitting responses.

A conditioned reinforcer allows you to mark the exact instant that the animal is doing the right thing. With the conditioned reinforcer (the click) you can tell the animal what you want more clearly, in circumstances where you could not present food in mid-behavior. For example, you can click as the dog clears a jump, while it is in

mid air; or you can click behavior that occurs at a distance, such as retrieving, or that occurs very briefly, such as pricking the ears. Once you have established a positive conditioned reinforcer by repeatedly pairing it with primary reinforcers, you can use it to selectively increase the behavior you want the animal to perform.

(You have to maintain its conditioned reinforcing property by continuing to pair it with the unconditioned reinforcer at least some of the time.)

Why is it that the conditioned reinforcer elicits such a powerful response?

The use of a conditioned reinforcer that can easily be delivered at the precise moment intended, particularly a sound, which does not require the animal to be watching, helps you selectively increase the exact form of the animal's behavior that is desired.

Conditioned reinforcers like a click sound are actually no more powerful than other reinforcers. What makes the "click" so effective in selectively increasing the behaviors it follows is (1) trainers have been taught to repeatedly pair the click with food, which keeps it a strong conditioned reinforcer, (2) the distinctive, momentary sound encourages you to be very careful about when you deliver the conditioned reinforcer.

This exact timing following a thoughtfully chosen behavior is the heart of a good reinforcement contingency. In fact, it is usually much more effective than what trainers were doing before they started using a clicker, which is why it seems extraordinarily powerful. In addition, because less precise reinforcement procedures often involve a slight delay between the exact behavior that should be targeted & the actual delivery of reinforcement, the behavior that is selected (increased) is sometimes not exactly the form of responding that is desired.

8. How do clicker training methods differ from other training methods?

The biggest difference is in the abundant & constructive use of conditioned reinforcers. The second biggest difference between traditional trainers & clicker trainers may lie in their understanding of successive approximation. Clicker trainers are able to break behavior down into small, achievable steps, & approach any behavioral goal via conditioned reinforcement & shaping, rather than by more global methods such as modeling & compulsion. This is not to say traditional trainers never do that, of course they do; but not as methodically & as generally; &, often, "trainer error" is incorporated rather than weeded out.

Finally, in general, clicker trainers do not rely on punishment to teach behavior; but that is really a by-product of these applications. When you shape behavior with a CR you don't need as much correction, & correction has toxic side effects. (Read "Coercion & Its Fallout" by Murray Sidman). But the difference really has nothing to do with all positive, in fact, a conditioned negative reinforcer is very useful; the main difference is the knowledgeable & timely application of the CR.

Do I have to continue clicking and treating forever?

No. Clicker training is used to teach/learn new behaviors. Once the behavior is learned the clicker isn't needed any more for that behavior although praise and treats will always be appreciated. Whenever you want to train a new behavior, or fine-tune an old, use the clicker.

How can I use a clicker to teach my dog NOT to do something?

Most ways of using positive reinforcement to reduce the frequency of a problem behavior involve creating or increasing desired behaviors. For example, one approach is to train an incompatible behavior. You can train the dog to sit when

someone comes in the house. The dog can't sit & jump at the same time, so making sitting more likely under those conditions makes jumping less likely. The dog can now earn reinforcement by sitting & being greeted by the guest.

You can train any behavior to function in this way, as long as the behavior is intermittently reinforced. You can also put the undesired behavior on cue. You could teach the dog to rear up on its hind legs with a command like "paws up" & offer your forearm as a place for the dog to rest its front legs. In training this performance, it is important to never reinforce the behavior if it occurs in the absence of the command. After this training is well established the dog will be unlikely to jump up when the command is not offered. There are many other ways of getting rid of unwanted behavior. However, they do not involve the use of a clicker.

Will clicker training work with my dog?

Yes. Clicker training works with all breeds, all ages, all types of dogs, purebred and rescue, champions and house companions. With deaf dogs, substitute a light flash for the clicker.

What can you train an animal to do?

In the words of Dr. Marian Bailey of Animal Behavior Enterprises, "Anything it is physically & mentally capable of doing."

My trainer or vet doesn't use clicker training, why? Others I know do use it. If it is so great, why isn't it universally practiced?

We wish it were! Real change takes time...and then some. If a trainer or a vet you know doesn't clicker train it is probably because they haven't had much exposure and/or they feel their existing methods for training or curing behavior problems work well enough already.

Karen Pryor has been clicker training or using “operant conditioning” with animals since her days as a dolphin trainer in the 1960’s. New ideas usually take time to work their way fully into acceptance. (As an example, Karen also wrote a landmark book in 1963, Nursing Your Baby, which advocated breastfeeding babies in an era when most babies were formula-fed. While her book soon became a classic and helped turn the tide of attitudes toward breastfeeding, there still remains some resistance to breastfeeding.)

We believe in “changing the world one click at a time” because it is only by experiencing clicker training themselves that people who care about animals will realize its full potential. More and more trainers are using clicker training to teach basic obedience and other classes, more shelters are using it to care for animals and more vets are recommending it