

Clicking Miracles by Karen Pryor copyright 1997 (reproduced with permission)

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There's a certain kind of dog-owning household that produces, entirely out of kindness and good intentions, an almost unmanageable dog. This dog doesn't just jump up on people, but careens into them, grabs and tears at their clothes, knocks over furniture and small children, steals, digs, barks, and carries on incessantly. The family has almost always had the dog since puppyhood: Sometimes it is two or three years old before they begin looking for help.

The owners love the dog, even though it is driving them crazy. They buy toys for it. They fence the yard. They give up visitors. They spend a lot of money on the vet. They think this is what having a dog entails. Often these owners are very intelligent and well-educated: perhaps they have little experience with pets, but they may have Ph.D's and they have lots of arguments in favor of the dog. After all, it is housebroken. It doesn't bite. They won't hear a word against it, in fact. And they put up with all the overboard behavior with incredible patience: with, in fact, total passivity.

The passivity, in fact, is, I suspect, really the source of the problem. No way are these civilized people going to take old-fashioned training advice and scold their dog, or hit it, or choke it, or punish its off-the-wall behavior. But they really don't know what they should be getting from the dog, or what to do, so they placate the dog, distract it, explain away its behavior and, often do nothing. Meanwhile, the dog is in limbo. The dog can't find out anything to do that works. So it has learned to try anything, all the time. And, inadvertently, sometimes its escalating efforts to get action pay off. It does get to go outside; or to come in. It does get a new toy to destroy. This reinforces the frantic activity intermittently, which makes the behavior even more intense. What the dog does not get, meanwhile, is meaningful communication, often not even eye contact,

from its people.

Behaviorist Polly Hanson gave an interesting paper at the Association for Behavior Analysis annual meeting in 1994 on just such a couple -- a psychoanalyst and his wife, who by inadvertent reinforcement and studious justifications had developed self-injurious behavior in their dog (a lick granuloma, or never-healing wound, on the paw).

Recently Sue Ailsby, a Canadian clicker trainer, posted a dramatic account on the clicker list of a dog and a family in just such a predicament, which I think you will enjoy, and which she has kindly permitted me to share with you. I have added explanatory information {in brackets} where I thought it might be needed for clarification to newcomers:

"I had a six month old Golden Retriever bitch this afternoon. Nice mom and three kids, all at wit's end. The Golden had 'lots of problems' -- her mother nearly died giving birth, the pup was bottle-fed, then the breeder got sick, then after the owners got her, she was sick for two months, yadda, yadda, yadda...

"The pup arrived on my face. She wiggled and clawed and mouthed. She jumped on Song {Sue's Giant Schnauzer}. She jumped on the kids. She jumped on Mom. She didn't stop. She was AWFUL. I couldn't help it, I said, "You've been LIVING with THIS for four months?" She had NO attention span. If wiggling/clawing/ mouthing/jumping didn't get her what she wanted immediately, she was off to try it on someone else. Talk about ZERO social skills.

I tried just holding a {piece of} hot dog {concealed} in my hand, but she "attacked it" until she lost interest, and then she was GONE.

I had a hard time pairing the click and the treat because her eyeballs never focused in one spot long enough to see the treat fall, and she couldn't take it out of my hand because by then she was in my face again.

Song finally gave her a correction for climbing on HER, {i.e. the older dog growled} which she took extremely well (!), got off, then tried all kinds of things at a decent distance to get Song to play with her, including snapping in the air which freaked out Mom and the kids even worse. Since she took the correction from Song so well, I gave her the same one when she clawed my eyeballs the next time, which allowed her to stand still long enough to notice that I'd clicked and saw a treat I had tossed for her hitting the ground.

I spent a long time clicking her for coming back into the circle, for staying on the floor, for sitting (she started to offer sits), for making eye contact, for getting off Song again, etc., and she gradually started to settle down.

Finally I was able to go back to the food-in-hand self-control "trick." *{You hold the food in the closed fist until the animal gives up trying to get it, and sits back politely. THEN you click, and open your fist and give the treat. KP}* She licked-licked-licked-mouthed-bit then finally started to lose interest: Click/treat. By this time she had enough attention span and was calm enough that she noticed what had happened. We did it again. And again. And again. She understood.

Then I thought these people probably desperately needed a real trick, so I started on targeting my hand {shaping the behavior of touching the nose to the trainer's hand, and then following the moving hand} to a chorus of "She won't do that," and "She'd have to be smart to learn that!" I said not to worry, I'd take care of getting her to touch my hand, but THEY had to watch carefully and tell me when she understood that there was NO food in the target hand: that she had to touch it, in order to get the food from the other hand. Uh huh. Yeah. Right. Sure.

Well, I started. I suckered her into touching my hand. Click and treat from the other hand. And again. And again. And again. And again. "See, she won't learn this!" And again. And again. And again. Suddenly, she let out a yowl that sounded a dying cat. She looked at me full in the face for maybe five seconds, then screamed again. Then very tentatively, she reached her nose out and touched my hand ---- click/treat.

She didn't take the treat. She looked at my face again, then she EXPLODED. She spun in circles, she dropped her butt to the floor, she ran around the room six times. She crashed into things. And half the time, she was making this awful yowling noise. Suddenly she landed in a heap, sitting directly in front of me, and started BANGING my hand with her nose and looking in my face waiting for the Click, CLICK!, CLICK! TREATS!! I started to cry. Mom started to cry. The kids started to cry. My God, it was like *The Miracle Worker*. Then she started to learn "down," and the kids and everybody did round-the-room recalls {i.e. calling the dog from one person to another, with each person c/t the dog for coming} and then they did loose-leash {teaching the dog to walk on a loose leash, by clicking} -- it lasted 2.5 hours, it was an ORGY of learning. I've got goose bumps. What a great day!"

Sue Ailsby

A note from Karen Pryor: *Our Sunshine Books teaching video, **Clicker Magic!**, shows examples of some of the clicker training methods Sue mentions here, such as the sit and down, round-robin recalls, and loose-leash walking, as well as a similar, though by no means so dramatic, use of the clicker to communicate with an off-the-wall pet.*