



Using a Clicker for Dog Training

Based on the theory of operant conditioning, which says that reinforced behaviors are more likely to be repeated, clicker training shapes a dog's behavior using positive reinforcement.

Why does clicker training work?

Clicker training uses a 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't I just use my voice? In other words, why is clicker training better than positive attention, praise, food, or other training methods?

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, non-emotional marker so your dog always receives the same information. The clicker is also distinct from other signals in the environment.

Additionally, the information that 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.

And because clicker training doesn't rely on punishment, force, aversive methods, sprays, or choke collars to get results, it is the only method of training that is safely and effectively used with puppies. As a result:

Basic training, good manners, and fun games can be easily self-taught even in busy family households where time is short and schedules are hectic.

Training can be woven into daily activities, including walking to school, making dinner, or even watching television.

Everyone in the family-children and adults-can participate and share in the fun both with puppies and adult dogs.

What results should I expect and when?

There is a "light bulb 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 Remote Control to Your Television" may take a several sessions, yet each session will only be 5-15 minutes long!

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 one, use the clicker.

Is a lot of experience required to clicker train successfully?

Absolutely not. Clicker training is easy to learn with the right instructions-especially from an experienced clicker trainer such as those who teach dog training classes at The Humane Society for Seattle/King County. 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.

Will clicker training work with my dog?

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

My dog isn't food motivated, what do I do?

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 (bits of hotdogs, for example) and that your dog's meals do not immediately precede a training session.

Won't my dog get fat if I feed him every time I train him?

No. Tiny amounts 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 also good exercise and highly stimulating. Dogs work when they clicker train! You may also wish to substitute a clicker session for one of your dog's regular mealtimes.

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 training. 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.