

Clicker Training

Your Puppy or Dog

Clicker training basics:

What is clicker training?

Clicker training is the term given to a method of animal training that uses a marker (sound or other signal – e.g. the “click” of a clicker) to tell an animal when they have done something that is going to earn them a reward.

While a marker can be any sound (like a whistle or a word such as “yes”) or visual signal (a flash of light or thumbs up –helpful for deaf dogs) the clicker is commonly used and thus the term “clicker training”.

What is a clicker?

A clicker is a small plastic box, often held in the palm of your hand (but some can be used underfoot), with a metal tongue or button that you push quickly to make the sound. The sound is what is referred to as the marker that will mark (think pin-point) to the dog the moment they did something that will be rewarded.



Most people who’ve heard of the clicker know that it’s a popular tool for dog trainers, but clickers can be used to train all kinds of animals, from wild to domestic e.g. zoo animals for husbandry procedures to our household cats, birds and rats!

How Does the Clicker Work?

The clicker creates an efficient language between a human trainer and an animal trainee. First, a trainer must teach the animal that every time they hear a clicking sound, the animal will get a food reward. Once the animal understands that clicks are always followed by food rewards, the click then has meaning and the dog becomes motivated to hear the click like we are motivated to earn money. The click is a signal that their paycheck is coming.

When the clicker has meaning to the animal the trainer can use the click to mark (identify for the animal) the instant the animal performs a behaviour worthy of a reward. So, if a trainer wants to teach a dog to sit, then they click the instant the dog’s rump hits the floor and then the trainer pays the dog with a tasty food reward. With repetition, the dog learns that sitting earns rewards.

The power of clicker training is that it clearly communicates to the animal what they did that earned the reward so they learn quickly and clearly what is expected of them. They learn the click means: “What I was doing the moment I heard that sound, THAT is what I need to do!” It’s like the winning buzzer on a game show that tells a contestant they just won money!

Although the clicker is ideal because it makes a unique, consistent sound, you do need a spare hand to hold it. For that reason, some trainers prefer to keep both hands free and instead use a one-syllable word like “Yes!” or “Click!” to mark the desired behaviour. So when working through the clicker training steps, you can substitute the click for your word or other signal to teach your dog what the word or signal means, just as you would with the clicker.

Training with the clicker:

Stage 1. Charging the clicker...

Initially the clicker will have no meaning to your dog. You need to teach them that the sound of the click means “Treat!”. To do this...

1. Have a container of small, tasty treats within reach.
2. Put one of treats in one hand and the clicker in the other. (If your dog smells the treat and tries to get it by pawing, sniffing, mouthing or barking at you, just close your hand around the treat and wait until he gives up and leaves you alone.)
3. Click once and immediately open your hand to give your dog the treat. Put another treat in your, now empty, hand and repeat 5 – 10 times.
4. At this stage it does not matter what the dog is doing as long as they are not pawing, sniffing, mouthing or barking at you (because you don’t want to be rewarding demanding behaviour accidentally). They don’t have to sit, stand or do anything in particular. You are just making an association between the clicker sound and the treat at this point in time.

5. Continue to repeat the click-and-treat combination at varying intervals, sometimes after one minute, sometimes after five minutes. Make sure you vary the time so that your dog doesn't know exactly when the next click is coming. Eventually, they will start to turn toward you and look expectant when they hear the click—which means they understand that the sound of the clicker means a treat is coming their way.

Stage 2. Using the clicker...

Once your dog seems to understand the connection between the click and the treat, you're ready to start using it in training sessions. Keep these guidelines in mind to ensure your clicker training success:

- Click just once, right when your dog does what you want them to do. Think of it like pressing the shutter of a camera to take a picture of the behaviour (too early or too late and you capture the wrong image).
- Remember to follow every click with a treat. After you click, deliver the treat to your dog's mouth as quickly as possible.
- Work on one behaviour at a time or take breaks in between different behaviours you want to work on in a session. For example, say you're teaching a dog to sit, lie down and raise his paw. You can do 10 repetitions of sit and take a quick break. Then do 10 repetitions of down, take another break and then do 10 repetitions of shake etc.
- Dogs, like children, have short attention spans. Keep training sessions short (15 minutes or less), and stop before you or your dog gets tired of the game.
- End training sessions on a positive note, when your dog has succeeded with what you're working on. If you need to, ask them to do something you know they can do well at the end of a session in order to end the session positively with success.
- For really tricky behaviours or ones you want to reinforce heavily you may consider clicking and then deliver a "jackpot" - a bunch of treats - when your dog has accomplished a particularly challenging task. Big efforts deserve big rewards!

Stage 3. Getting the behaviour...

To mark/click and reward a behaviour you like, you first need to find a way to get your dog to do that behaviour. Three of your options are.

1. Capturing means that you catch your dog in the act of doing the behaviour you want. It's the perfect method for behaviours that your dog already does on their own, like sitting, lying down etc. You simply see what you like, mark and reward it. Behaviour rewarded is repeated so when they offer it again you mark and reward is again to strengthen the behaviour.

2. Shaping is gradually build a new behaviour by marking/clicking and rewarding a series of small steps toward it. Shaping is a good method for training new behaviours (or a series of behaviours called a "chain") that your dog doesn't already do on their own naturally — like raising a paw in the air, maybe retrieving a ball or going to a specific spot to lie down. You start by rewarding the first small behaviour to start your dog on their way towards the behaviour you are after. When they mastered that first step, you wait for a little more of them until they reach the *next* small step to earn the click and treat. By reinforcing each tiny step as if it were the ultimate goal, your dog will think that learning is fun and will soon be performing the end goal behaviour with enthusiasm.

3. Luring involves using a treat or target like a magnet or guide to get your dog into a desired position. A food lure is a small piece of tasty food that is held right in front of your dog's nose and then moved while the dog follows it. Where the dog's nose goes the body follows and after some practice, you can just use the hand motion to prompt your dog instead of the food. You just make the same movement as before, but with no treat in your hand. Gradually you can make your hand signals smaller and shorter. Lure-and-reward training is often a quick and efficient method to get and reward behaviours.

Stage 4. Adding the cue...

If you've used luring, you'll know you're ready, to put it on cue, when your dog consistently does the behaviour you want as soon as you give your hand signal. If you've used capturing or shaping, you can add the cue when your dog is confidently offering the behaviour over and over again, without any other behaviours in between.

If you used luring, first say the cue word you'd like to use (only once) and then use your hand signal to prompt your dog. If you used capturing or shaping, first say the cue word then just wait for your dog to offer the desired behaviour. Click and treat the instant they do the behaviour.

Good timing is essential. Be sure to say your cue *before* your dog does the behaviour you want, not at the same time. If you practice these steps in order, your dog will eventually learn what the cue means and then you only reward the behaviour when you've cued it.

NOTE: If your dog is afraid of the clicker sound, you can make the sound softer by putting your hand with the clicker in your pocket or inside a couple of socks to muffle the sound. Alternatively use a verbal marker "Yes" or "Click" instead.

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