INTRODUCTION TO CLICKER TRAINING by Maureen Ross, MA

Clickers are a great way to train new behaviors. Clickers are a crisp, clear, distinctive signal that marks a particularly good behavior. Clickers and praise are conditioned reinforcers: A signal that tells your dog that you like or don't like a behavior. Unconditioned Reinforcers are treats, food, petting or any other pleasure or something the dog would want or get. It also let's your dog know that something good is coming.

Note: There is nothing inherently rewarding about a click or praise. It must be associated with the "real" reward: treat, pet, play games, smile … GOOD DOG. The click becomes a PREDICTOR to the dog that a treat or play is coming. He learns to like and work for the click that means reward!

Attentiveness, quick timing and coordination are valuable training assets. A clicker enables the trainer to have split-second timing. It communicates exactly what it is that the trainer is looking for; a behavior! If you were to use food only as a reinforcer and all the time, you would produce a bored dog before a happy, reliable one. You would likely get bored too!

Be mindful that clicking is not magic. It's fun and works. Is it for everyone? No. It's a tool of choice, and works very much like the whistle training the dolphin. The dolphin hears the whistle and knows exactly where to go and what s/he will get for a reward.

CLICKER TRAINING TIPS (if you choose to clickety click)

Get yourself a clicker and a few small, delicious treats. To avoid boredom or increase motivation, vary the reward which follows the click: kibble, string cheese, chicken dogs, Healthy Choice Kielbasi, a walk, a tummy rub, a game of hide n seek, liver treats! You get the picture. Ferret out boredom by being creative: add some spice and variety by sprinkling something tasty on the treat. If it is not delicious or overused … it will work. Think about what you are doing … shaping a behavior. Set yourself up for success. If you ate pizza 7-days a week, 3X a day, and then received an offer for a slice of pizza … you may turn completely green.

Begin by setting an intention. What behavior do you want to shape? Experts, including myself, strongly recommend practicing without your dog first to learn timing. Use a fake dog. Okay, you have picked a behavior like sit. You have several ways to shape this. You can teach your dog a sit, click when he sits, then reward. You can also wait until your dog gives you a desired behavior. The dog automatically sits … you immediately click and treat, thus marking the behavior.

The clicker has great value in shaping new behavior or refining details; it's not necessary in exhibiting behavior that the dog has already learned, like a sit. It can refine an okay sit to a flashy, quick sit. There is no "cookbook recipe" for developing behavior because each training session is different. You have to "wing it", be creative and use your imagination. That's what so much fun about clicker training. And, there are no bad mistakes, just learning experiences. If you click the wrong behavior at the wrong time, forgive yourself! It's fine. Just try again.

CLICK FIRST, THEN TREAT

Click first, and then treat. Always click while the behavior is happening, no 5 seconds later, UNLESS, you look across the room and your dog is relaxing on her side. Is this what you want to teach – a relaxed dog on her side? CLICK AND BOWL A TREAT. The "click" is like an arrow that goes right into the dog's nervous system with the message "what you are doing at this instant has just paid off" … click/treat.

Only click once. Resist the temptation to develop multiple clicking disorders (clickety, clickety, click, click, click). The timing is crucial to tell the dog exactly what you liked. If you click all over the place or children are clicking away, it will render the whole process useless. The dog will try out a repertoire of many behaviors, but never become reliable at the one you specifically want.

When you get your "Jackpot" (a specific behavior),
convey your enthusiasm with multiple treats and praise.

Don't use your clicker to get your dog's attention or to come-on-recall unless that is the only thing you will use the clicker for. If you use the clicker as a distraction from the environment or to get your dog to come, it will lose its power of information for the dog. To teach come for example you could call your dog. As soon as you get your dog's attention click/treat. If the dog doesn't come, then toss the treat to the dog. Try again form a few feet away. This is called successive approximately. You are rewarding small incremental successes that are on the right path. If you receive a head turn and a couple steps towards you: click/treat. After five or six reinforcements, even a cautious dog will join you.

Don't click to fix or cease a behavior!
The clicker is designed for starting and marking a behavior, not for stopping it! Teaching the new
behavior WILL help eliminate the undesirable ones … like click / treat for chewing this, not that!

Click only the behavior you want. Don't use your clicker for encouragement or as a start signal. For example, if your dog lags behind you and you click, you are reinforcing the lagging. If your dog hesitates and you click, you are reinforcing the hesitation. When your dog is walking easily by your side … click/treat. Then, over a series of brief sessions, challenge yourself and the dog by changing speed and direction. You get the idea.

Click for success! Don't bag the whole process over one mistake. Go back to kindergarten. If your dog looks at you, click/treat. Always end on a positive note, or just end, but never angrily stop a training session. If you are all stressed out, chances are your dog is too. This is miscommunication happening. ***Take-a-deep-breath and a break for some personal renewal.***

Use small, sensible treats. Common sense rules are to train when your dog is hungry.
Otherwise, food will have little value for him. If you feed your dog 2X a day,
you have 14 training opportunities a week …

⮑ Do a five minute click n treat session before the dog's mealtime.
⮑ Don't leave food down all day.
⮑ Make treats part of the dog's total food intake.
⮑ Use small, easy-to-chew, healthy treats.

Shaping / Target Behavior

Shaping behavior is not as complicated as it sounds, nor is a target behavior. They kind of go together. You decide what your target behavior is (dog lie down) and shape that behavior. You can choose a target behavior that is dog-wag-tail. When the tail wags, shape it by clicking and treating.

I got so excited the first time my Greyhound, Tia, showed me a "sparkle" (ears up) that I nearly scared her to death with my enthusiastic "YES – SPARKLE." It made her body language much perkier, but I needed to adjust my zest. I scared her.

For shaping to be successful, it is important to clearly define the behavioral objective (sit, down). To gradually achieve the target behavior (dog down), a teacher must know when to deliver or withhold reinforcement (Wolfgang 37).

Many behaviors are taught by shaping and it is used in a variety of settings. For example, parents use shaping when they praise a young child profusely the first time he dresses himself, even if he has made a few mistakes. Later, they will only complement the child if he has dressed himself with few mistakes (Alberto and Troutman, 2003).

Give it a try. Now that you have your dog use to the clicker, you can establish a behavior. Pick a behavior that is easy and can be accomplished, working your way up to more challenging ones. Set the intention, visualize the behavior and go for it. You can start with a simple request to "touch" your finger. When you receive a touch … click/treat. The treat must follow the click to be effective. Try "touch" to your finger again (targeting). When the dog touches, click/treat. Do this several times. Now, hold out your finger & say "touch". If the dog touches … click/treat. ***Try again, but this time do not say "touch".*** If you dog touches: no click … no treat, just a "tough luck, or "too bad". Why? Because you did not request a "touch". This is what teaches the difference.

Keep Training Fun! Always toss in a few easy tasks when you are working on more difficult ones. Sessions should not go from easy to hard every time … wham … this will teach your dog to avoid training altogether. Always end the session with something easy, successful and fun.

When your dog has learned a new behavior, now you can begin clicking for every second response, then third and so on. This is integrating a variable reinforcement schedule into click/treat. It actually builds stronger behavior because the dog is anticipating the next click/treat.

Training should be in short bursts. Three or four sessions, each five to ten minutes long, will be more effective than three half hour long sessions where both you and the dog become exhausted or bored

to tears. Behaviors trained by shaping and reinforcement do not deteriorate. If you become too relaxed with your dog, they may get put away for awhile, kind of like a bike in storage. Take it out, dust it off, and get on.

Sometime learning hits a plateau where the dog doesn't seem to "get it". They seem to have amnesia ("who am I, where am I, what am I suppose to be doing"?). Plateaus are a gift because they usually are preceded with a huge leap forward. "AHA … watch this … I can do it". Don't panic … regress … start over. Look at what is going on for your today too. Are you present, in the moment, or not excited about teaching anything today?

Dogs live in context, so we need to train them in all the rooms in the home and a broad variety of environments and situations. If a behavior falls apart, no problem. Go back to kindergarten. If your dog has been training in the same environment, then goes with you to park with exciting new smells, sights and sounds, it is very likely that s/he will enjoy the pure entertainment and ignore you! Give the dog a moment to enjoy themselves, than review the shaping procedure to establish the behavior in a new environment. It may require one session or several, but it will go much faster than it did the first time if you practice every day as an integral part of living and learning with dogs.

Quit while you are ahead. When you achieve something good … "Bravo". Otherwise, your dog will make a mistake in an attempt to give you a behavior.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What if my dog doesn't like treats or won't work for food? HA HA HA, that's funny. I giggle when people say this to me because as the dog's pack leader, we are in charge of hunting / gathering, thus feeding the dog. Every dog requires nutrition to survive. The trick is to use a preferred, delicious food and train when the dog is hungry, not full.

What if I have more than one Dog? Separate the dogs! Work with one at a time. The other dogs may hear the clicks, but they won't receive the treats. They won't be confused, just eager for their turn.

How long should a training session be? How often should I train? Five-10 minute sessions, whenever you can. More and longer is not better. Short training bursts/sessions are more fun, rewarding and less tiring. Integrating into daily busy lifestyles makes sense! Use feeding time to click and training (sit/click/good … here is a kibble).

Should I train more than one behavior at a time? Sure, but do not work on more than one detail of any given behavior at a time. For example: if you are working on getting your dog to wag their tail, then click/treat for tail wagging. Work on sit / stay or down separately. Chances are your dog may AutoShape into a sit anyway while wagging because most dogs have learned to sit first. So you have a choice; do you want your dog standing or sitting while wagging? Click that!

What happens if I make a mistake?   Flog yourself! Just kidding. Forgive yourself and the dog. If you don't make any mistakes, I'm concerned because we all make mistakes. That's how we learn. Laugh

it off! Play with your dog or be neutral and simply say "let's try this again." It is easy to click too soon, too late or too many times. When we learn something new, we get excited. Lock yourself in a room and have a clickety click party with yourself. Clicker training is fun, fair, flexible and forgiving, but all training needs intention, focus and clarity.

What do I do if my dog makes a mistake? Don't click! Don't say "no" or "stupid jerk". It will only make the dog less interested in clicker training. How about "too bad, tough luck". Then try again.

Does that mean I should never punish my dog? That depends on how you define punishment. To be successful, punishment must be absolute, quick and used every time for that misbehavior. It is an impossible task. Punishment will temporarily cease a behavior in your presence; that's it! Teach! That's the key. When you want to stop a behavior … teach the preferred behavior. *Click/Treat is for teaching new behaviors* or to modify old behaviors. Punishment does not fairly fit this equation.

Shouldn't the dog respect, even fear me to ensure long-term reliability? Duh? **Respect** denotes both a positive feeling of esteem for a person of other entity, and also specific actions and conduct representative of that esteem. If you haven't read online by now or heard it on HD, dogs know we aren't Alpha Wolves. True reliability is earned with compassion, practice and trust. A respected pack leader set goals, establishes fair boundaries / rules and is flexible. They don't expend a lot of energy roaring. Positive reinforcement creates a dog that is doing things for you because he wants to and understands that it is his best interest.

When do I use commands? Never! You teach behaviors with request (cues) so that the dog understands what we want in a variety of different ways, places and situations. Any word you use can be unique to you and your dog, as long as you remember what you are using and for what behavior. You can speak in fork tongue or sign, if you and dog communicate well that way.

What if you give a cue and the dog doesn't do it? How are you and your dog feeling today? Stressed out? Have you established the cue and successfully received the response/behavior under that circumstance? A dog may sit beautifully at home, but would rather chase squirrels at the park. He is suddenly hearing impaired. You need to introduce training with distractions under new conditions such as a park to create a reliable dog / people companionship.

When can I get rid of food? Unless you want your dog to pass away, I strongly encourage you to never get rid of food! By now, you should know what your dog's life rewards and high-ranking motivators are. You can build them into the training practice. Using Variable or Differential reinforcement schedules is clever. When you decide to teach a NOVEL behavior, begin again with enthusiastic click / treats.

Variable Ratio Reinforcement (VR) — the dog is rewarded after an unpredictable number of responses. For example, the dog is rewarded after varying numbers of sits that average out to be 8 sits per reward. VR reinforcement is good for maintaining high frequencies of behavior for longer durations and for fewer rewards. VR makes it easier to phase out food rewards because the dog gets used to working for an increasing number of repetitions without reward. Think slot machine. What

do you do when it hasn't paid out on your last ten dollars? You take your eleventh dollar, rub it and pray to your angels because you're certain that this is the one. After five more dollars without a payout, you get ten dollars back and the machine has you hooked, even though you lost five bucks!

A Random Ratio schedule is just as good. Just reward recalls and sits at random and your dog is going to keep coming and sitting forever, especially you reward with high-ranking motivators (dog loves it). I like the concept of random reinforcement — the notion that we can be entirely random, consistently inconsistent, a dummy, yet still maintain motivated levels of high frequency responding in our dogs.

Differential Reinforcement (DR) — the dog is given different valued rewards that reflect the quality of the performance, for example, only reward the dog for above-average responses, give better rewards for better responses and give the best rewards for the best responses.

Right from the get go — the puppy's very first lesson — differential reinforcement is the only way to go to continually and progressively increase the reliability, frequency, elegance and bling of performance.

Enjoy your journey and remember, we are either on the path or finding the path … to living and learning with our dogs.

For more intense learning opportunities … explore Karen Pryor's www.clickertraining.com.