

Clicker training – a review

By Judy Seils

What is a clicker? A clicker is usually a small plastic box about (1”x 2”) with a metal tab fitted inside. When you depress the metal tab quickly it produces a sharp “click.”

What is the purpose of a clicker? The click is used to “mark” a behavior. When you are training a pet, you must “mark” the desired behavior to encourage a repeat of that behavior. For example, when a dog “sits” you might say “good” or “there,” the “click” is a more precise way of “marking” the behavior.

Why should I use a clicker instead of words to mark the behavior? You can still use words and should use words to mark a desired behavior. The clicker will allow you to teach the behavior much faster and with a finer degree of control.

Why does the clicker work so well? You will teach the dog that the “click” means they will get a reward. Once the dog relates a “click” with a treat, you have pretty much an unlimited tool for teaching your dog. Any behavior that is rewarded will be repeated. The click is a very clear marker for the dog that a reward is coming. Clicker training, once you have some practice at it, is a much more precise marker than your words. Consistency is the key to training and a “click” that is always the same will work much faster than a verbal cue that may change depending on your mood.

Where can I find a clicker? The major chain pet stores carry clickers, Petco and Petsmart. You may want to try the clicker to make sure it works well before you buy it. When you quickly depress the metal tab you should get a sharp “click.” The tab should depress easily and rebound smoothly. You may also find clickers online and in some pet magazines. There are a variety of clickers besides the original box shape, even ergonomic clickers.

How do I get started? Before you start working with your dog, get comfortable with the clicker. First, you should practice your timing. A click should be given at the exact nanosecond the desired behavior occurs. Practice away from your dog so he does not become desensitized to the sound. Have someone help you by dropping an object to the floor, click at the exact moment the object hits the floor. If you don’t have someone to help, listen to the TV or radio for a specific word and click when you hear it.

The clicker is not a remote control device. You may find yourself pointing the clicker at the dog. To avoid this, practice clicking with your hand at your waist, by your side, or behind your back.

Another thing to note is that the “click” ends the behavior. It means a treat is coming, so the dog is allowed to get out of the sit or down and basically stop whatever it is you were teaching.

You also need to have a soft treat to give the dog. Small tidbits, no larger than the eraser on a pencil are used as rewards. You may want to practice delivering the treat after the click. Place 10 small treats in the same hand as the clicker. When you click, take a treat and place it in a small bowl (you are simply simulating giving the treat to your dog.)

Practice clicking with both hands and giving the treats with both hands. This will help you down the road.

Now add your dog. Now that you are more comfortable with the clicker, it is time to introduce it to your dog. Make sure you do not feed your dog right before a clicker session. In fact the hungrier they are the better. Use a soft treat that the dog really likes. (I recommend Natural Balance Dog Food) Put the dog on a leash at first so they do not wander off.

Now, click and treat. Repeat this 10-15 times no matter what the dog is doing. Offer the treat to the dog right after the click.

Click then treat. The dog ALWAYS gets a treat when you click, *even if you click the wrong thing.*

Keep your sessions short, no more than two minutes at a time. Take a short break then start again. You will need to repeat this step anywhere from 5 to 20 times, depending on the dog. Spread the sessions out over several days or even a week. Once the dog is looking at you after every click and treat you are ready for the next step.

IF your dog seems frightened by the clicking noise, do not give up. Make sure the reward is something the dog really wants. You can soften the click at first by putting the clicker behind your back or muffling it with a piece of cloth. Verbally praise the dog after each click and keep the experience very positive. **DO NOT** baby the dog, ignore the cringing, scared behavior and only acknowledge the braver, more confident behavior. This way you will reinforce the behavior you want.

Many dogs are frightened by the click at first; you can click before you feed the dog, just to get them accustomed to it if they are afraid. Again, praise the dog after the click, especially when they offer more normal “positive” body language. Praise can include touching and petting the dog, verbal praise and treats.

Step 2. Now you are ready for the next step. Wait for your dog to look at you, then click and treat. Repeat this, always click then treat. **IF you click by mistake, you must still treat the dog.** Don’t worry, they will quickly get over your mistake, although sometimes you’ll end up with a cute trick this way.

Again, you will need to repeat this step until the dog is consistently looking at you. Only then should you go on to the next step. *Keep your sessions short, no more than two minutes at a time. Take a short break then start again.* Work on this step until the response you want (the dog looking into your eyes) is offered quickly and frequently. It may take only a few sessions, or it may take several dozen. Don’t worry if your dog doesn’t seem to get it right away. If it is an older dog, it may take more sessions.

Once the dog is looking at you, making eye contact for the click and treat, you can go to step three, teaching your dog a new behavior.

Step 3. There are several ways to teach a behavior with a clicker. You can reinforce a known behavior, lure the dog, or capture.

Reinforcing a known behavior. In this case, you take a behavior the dog already knows, like sit and start using the clicker to mark the correct behavior. Ask the dog to “sit” with a verbal and/or visual cue. As soon as the dog’s rear end hits the ground, click and treat. Ask for the behavior, click and treat. You need to repeat this 10-15 times.

Again, keep the sessions short, no more than 2 minutes at a time. Young dogs especially, have a short attention span. Once your dog is used to clicker training, you may be able to go longer, but short and fun is always better.

After a few sessions the dog should start offering the sit on its own. **Click and treat this!** This is what you want the dog to do, offer behaviors on his own. You will also notice that the dog does not get out of the sit position. **That’s good too!** This will help with your Sit/Stay. Simply wait for a few more seconds before clicking, the dog will learn to “sit” longer. If the dog will not get out of the position, toss the treat to the floor a few feet away from him and then start over.

Luring the dog into position. Luring is easily done. Place a treat in the palm of your hand and put your thumb over the treat. Show the dog the treat. Have the dog follow your hand.

The easiest way to lure is to teach the Touch command. This is done by putting a treat (food lure) under your thumb (as described above). Present the palm of your hand to the dog. As soon as the dog's nose "Touches" your hand, click and treat. **Do not give the dog the treat under your thumb;** use one from your stash of treats. Repeat the session with a treat under your thumb 2-5 times then 'pretend' to have the treat under your thumb, most dogs will start to respond very quickly. It is important to remove the food lure as quickly as possible or the dog may become dependent on having the food lure to perform the behavior.

Continue to work the 'Touch,' without the treat, just pretending you have one under your thumb. Present your hand, click and treat. Repeat the session until the dog consistently "Touches" your hand. Then you will say the word "Touch" present your hand, click and treat.

You do not want to say the command word until the dog is offering the behavior consistently. Then you will "name" the command by saying the word just before you "lure" the dog into position. Very shortly the dog will begin to associate the command word with the behavior. The quality needs to go in before the name goes on otherwise you are just nagging the dog with a command he doesn't understand.

Remember – ALWAYS treat if you click.

Capturing/shaping a behavior. This is especially effective on puppies that start out with a clicker. They learn to "think," to offer new behaviors in hopes of getting a click and treat. Older dogs can be taught the clicker and may eventually begin to offer new behaviors, many will have to be lured, but that's okay, they are still learning new tricks.

Capturing a behavior is exactly that. You wait for a behavior that the dog does naturally and then click and treat.

To shape a behavior you must start simple. If you hope to teach the dog to spin, you may have to start with just a slight head turn. Click and treat. Once the dog is offering the head turn, up the stakes and don't click until the dog turns its head a little farther. Step by step, the dog will eventually go all the way around.

You may only get as far as a head turn in the first few sessions. That's okay. Shaping is all about letting the dog figure out the trick. When a behavior is taught in this way it is often much stronger than one that is lured or heaven forbid that the dog is forced into.

Again, do not "name" the behavior until the dog is offering the complete behavior consistently. Then say the command word before the behavior, click and treat.

The clicker is one of the best training tools you will ever use. People who train animals for amusement parks and movies use clickers. All those cats you see on TV are probably trained by clicker.

And don't worry about having to carry it around all the time. A clicker is a great tool, but you can still use your voice to mark behaviors. You also only need to use the clicker when teaching a new behavior or refining a current one. You should not forget to use verbal praise and other forms of reward to reinforce known behaviors or you may lose them.

Any dog can learn to love clicker training, it may take time to undo some of the "training" done to older dogs, but in the end it is well worth it. A friend had a 9 year old female Chow Chow who pretty much only ate, slept and pottied. She introduced the clicker to the dog and soon had her offering behaviors. The dog even got excited when the clicker was pulled out.

My first dog was six years old when we first started with the clicker and was initially afraid of the click. Once I worked her through the fear, she was hooked and learned dozens of new tricks. My new puppy started clicker training at 10 weeks of age as soon as I brought her home the first time and has not stopped learning new behaviors to this day.

The best thing about clicker training is the satisfaction of seeing your dog *enjoy* learning with you. You don't have to force them into a sit or down. The dog learns faster and you get results much more quickly with this positive training technique.

Have fun clicking!

www.pawfectmanners.com