

Clicker Talk

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The dog is a product of the changing circumstances of its environment. It lives in the moment and is continually assessing the immediate consequences of its actions. It does this by asking, *What did that get me?*

What works for the dog is what it will do. As trainers, we take this natural tendency for a dog's behavior to be a function of consequences and put it to work in training. The clicker-training technique focuses on manipulating and controlling consequences through reinforcement techniques to change the probabilities of future behavior.

When effectively used, the clicker is a powerful communication tool for you and your dog in shaping behaviors. This small plastic device, once called a cricket, makes a *click-click* sound when its metal tongue is depressed. In training, it is this sound that will give a dog, once conditioned, essential information from the trainer. It says, *That's it! Good boy! and Yes!* all at once while marking for the dog the exact behavior that "caused" the click. During the early stages of training, it is this magic sound that the clicker-trained dog will come to work for.

Benefits of the Clicker

- It improves your timing as the trainer. Timing is critical in training. Most experts believe that consequences (rewards or corrections) must be immediate—within 1.3 seconds—to be associated with a particular behavior.



Clickers are simple tools capable of communicating clearly to the dog the desired outcome in some complex training exercises.

- It is a clear signal to the dog, allowing you to reinforce from a distance; the clicker acts as a bridge.
- It allows your dog to engage in the learning process. It says, *Try, try again*, because it gives the dog the freedom to make things happen for itself. This success builds confidence, a benefit to all dogs.
- It teaches you to better read your dog. You learn to focus on the positive things your dog does, and that is a healthier, more useful attitude for both the trainer and the student.
- It builds trust, because the communication is unambiguous.
- It helps build self-control in the dog. Dogs want good stuff, and they want it now. The clicker says the paycheck is coming after they work for it.

How It Works

The clicker-training technique has been used with animals since the 1940s, with a growth in its popularity and impact on the dog world beginning in the 1990s. It has elements of both classical and operant conditioning. Classical, or Pavlovian, conditioning occurs when an animal learns associations among events. The dog learns to respond to the first event in anticipation of the second: You pick up your leash, and

your dog gets excited because it predicts a walk outside is forthcoming. Operant conditioning is when an animal learns that its behavior has consequences—that it has an impact on its environment. For example, if the canine living in the wild doesn't go out and hunt, it doesn't eat; if a companion dog jumps up on the door and someone opens it, it gets to come in.

The clicker, in behavioral terms, is a conditioned reinforcer. A reinforcer strengthens or makes a behavior more likely to occur in the future and is presented immediately following a behavior. There are primary reinforcers—things a dog intrinsically likes and works for, such

as food, social contact and play—and secondary or conditioned reinforcers, whose significance is learned through association by pairing them with primary reinforcers such as a whistle or the dog's name. The clicker sound is neutral to the dog until it takes on meaning through classical conditioning by pairing it with a primary reinforcer such as food. Food is easy and basic to most canines. The conditioned reinforcer (click) is coincidentally or immediately followed by the primary reinforcer (treat/food). With consistent repetitions of this, an association is made and the click sound becomes a signal that reinforcement (food) will follow. With repetition, the secondary reinforcer takes on qualities of the primary reinforcer and becomes a good thing by itself, and this strength can be used in a number of ways.

Why the clicker and not the voice, a whistle or a physical touch? It is immediate and distinct and can be delivered with exact timing and the same sound each time. The clicker is faster than verbal praise, more precise, non-emotional and not diluted by use in other arenas. It can be heard from a distance and thus bridge the time gap between when the sound is heard—marking the behavior for the dog—and when the reinforcement is de-

livered. The clicker ends a behavior, takes a snapshot for the dog's file, and lessens the chance for confusion.

How to Start

First you need to base load your dog. Base loading establishes the association between the sound of the click and the positive reinforcement that follows and requires just a couple of short sessions. Simply cut up 20 to 30 bite-sized soft treats (hot dogs, cheese, chicken). Training treats need to be of a soft consistency, so that they can be easily delivered and swallowed. Go to an area that is familiar to your dog—one with few distractions, because you want to focus on the dog and have it keyed in on you. Have the treats easily accessible in a bowl or bag that is out of reach of the dog. Now begin to give single clicks immediately followed with a treat until all the treats are gone. The closer each treat follows a click, the better the association. No talking is needed and would only add confusion. Remember that you are not looking for any behavior at this time; you are merely setting the stage for an association to be formed. One or two sessions should suffice.

Once the dog understands that the click predicts that a reward will follow, you can begin to reinforce those acceptable behaviors that you want to incorporate into your dog's training. Early in our training program we use shaping and prompting to teach a desired behavior. In shaping you have an ultimate goal that you break down into small logical steps of progression. You reinforce the behavior that you want and disregard others. For example, in the beginning stages of teaching "Whoa" to pups, we have several raised boards ("prompts") of different heights placed around the training area. We will lead a puppy near a board and let its inquisitive nature take over. My first acceptable behavior may be to have the pup stand with all four feet on the board. Initially, I will click and treat for any interest in the board, one paw on the board, three on, one off. My criteria may seem low, but realize that the dog also is learning the important concept of how to engage in a training bargain that says, *You do something for me, and I'll do something for you.* I want the pup to start looking for information about what I am asking, and the confirmation that it gave it to me goes back via clicker talk. After a couple of sessions, the pup will be hopping on the board and looking for what's next.

With clicker training, you need to be forward-looking in your training. You need

to have the next piece of the puzzle at hand, because the dog becomes an active, enthusiastic participant in the training.

You want to keep a 1:1 click-to-treat ratio until a behavior is well entrenched—about 80 percent reliable. Then, having developed some consistency in a behavior, you can begin to strengthen it by raising the criteria in small steps. At the start, you click and treat every time; in the example of the dog on the board, I may wait for the dog to stand longer (seconds) before I click, or perhaps I will want it to get on the board two or three times in a row before I click and reinforce. I am asking for more effort on the dog's part, but I still am staying with the bargain I made of one click/one treat.

This exercise is introducing the dog to the concept of variable reinforcement, in which it learns that reinforcement is coming but it does not know when. This anticipation helps motivate the dog, establishes behavior that is more difficult to extinguish, and sets the stage for behavior requiring long-duration training, such as holding point. Bear in mind that from the dog's point of view everything has changed now that you are asking for something different. If the dog encounters difficulty or becomes frustrated, then lower your standards. You may need to go back to what was successful and repeat that behavior until it is reestablished.

Thus far we have said little to the dog in training. Dogs eat, sleep, use their noses, and use a lot of body language. Chants of "Sit, Sit, Sit" and "Come, Come, Come" are blather and tuned out by dogs unless we teach them a meaning for the command. We introduce a cue/command for a behavior when the dog is starting to reliably offer the behavior. At this time it already is aware of some of the behavior we are working on and is less likely to associate the cue with something extraneous or to become confused. To add a command/cue, you add the word just prior to when you are about to click, and then follow with the treat. Again, timing is crucial, because you do not want to allow any time for the dog's mind to wander to something extraneous. By reinforcing that specific behavior, you are increasing the probability that the dog will come to associate the cue with that behavior and not other behaviors. Say the word/command once. You are dealing with associations, and if you repeat the cue, the dog will expect "Sit, Sit, Sit" to be the command rather than "Sit."

For example, the dog already has the behavior of stopping and standing on the board in place. To attach the command

"Whoa" to this action, you will walk the dog to the board and, just as it is stepping on, you will say "Whoa," click and follow with the reinforcer/treat. Continue with consistent repetitions of this.

Gradually add motion to this, with the dog remaining stopped on the board while you continue moving forward. You accomplish this with small changes in your forward movement and in the timing of your click. As the dog comes onto the board, you command "Whoa" but hold off on the click a nanosecond until you have taken one or two steps beyond the board. Then click and treat. You will build on this to the point where you find yourself out in front of the dog.

The clicker is a construction tool for the beginning stages of learning. As behaviors become conditioned, the clicker is faded. This happens as a natural weaning process in your training. When the dog knows a behavior, you gradually will begin to click and reinforce on a more varied schedule; instead of a 1:1 ratio, you will mix in 2:1, 3:1 and so forth. The dog maintains the behavior, because it is confident that a reinforcer is on the horizon.

Because the clicker mainly is used for new behaviors, it has little application in the field, where you are working at great

CLICKER TIPS

- Don't click indiscriminately—it will weaken the power of the clicker. The clicker marks a behavior; it is not a cue.

- Don't rely on food as your only motivator. No single reinforcer will motivate a dog all of the time. Get creative, and read what works for your dog.

- The click ends a behavior. What happens afterward is not related to the training at hand.

- Commands are said once.

- Be generous. When you add new behaviors, expect and accept some backsliding of already learned behaviors. With patience and guidance, the learned behaviors will show up again.

- Something (someone) is always reinforcing a behavior for it to be maintained. Look at the trainer first, not the dog, to find the cause for wrong behavior.

- Rule of 3s: If you have three non-successes, you are moving too quickly and need to assess and address the possible cause.

With the clicker, there are endless possibilities. Have fun and enjoy.

—C.B.

distances. We transition from the yard to the field by transitioning from the clicker to the e-collar. This means teaching the dog how to avoid aversions/corrections. By this time the dog is a "student." It has sets of behaviors established and some cues in place. The dog knows that it can find a solution to a problem and progresses readily with the e-collar.

As dog trainers, we need to know a lot of things about a dog. Among these, we need to know how to observe a dog and interpret its behavior, how to best handle the dog in different situations, how to give clear instructions, how to apply consequences, and how to reinforce acceptable behavior. Most trainers use a variety of methods for teaching; few think about why a method may or may not work in a specific situation for a specific dog. With a better understanding of how to effect change in a dog's behavior comes the freedom of determining how best to teach your dog, along with insight as to why some methods are more effective than others. It helps make the training process easier for both of you.



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