

AN INTRODUCTION TO CLICKER TRAINING

WHAT IS CLICKER TRAINING

Clicker training is not a new concept in animal training. If you have ever watched a dolphin performance & wondered “Wow...how do they teach that stuff”. The dolphins have been taught their “tricks” by using a whistle & a bucket of fish. Clicker training is a positive reinforcement training system based on “shaping” the dog to do a particular behaviour instead of physically forcing a behaviour, correcting a behaviour through punishment, or forming a behaviour through prolonged luring.

Clicker Training is not just for shaping new behaviours or polishing old ones, it is also a very handy tool for correcting bad behaviours, including distractions, reactivity, running away, jumping up, barking & even aggression (in the right hands). For anyone interested in this, I thoroughly recommend reading “Control Unleashed” by Leslie McDevitt.

Clicker Training (CT) can be a valuable tool no matter what dog activity you are involved with. Police dogs, service dogs, obedience, agility, doggie dancing, tricks, hunting, tracking, the show ring, how to ride a skateboard, do a hand-stand, or just plain “good manners” is very successfully trained using the clicker system. You can even start with puppies, before weaning. Anything you need your dog to know, can be taught with positive reinforcement (clicker training). It is a very handy tool for “polishing” a behaviour that your dog has already learnt. I use an example on page three, where I re-taught our young boy the “pause table” in agility.

Basically the simple concept of CT, is the dog does a particular behaviour that you want, you click & then you treat. By using the clicker followed by a reinforcer, you are “shaping” the dog’s behaviour ie. allowing the dog to work it out for himself instead of being pushed, lured, tapped, jerked or verbally commanded. Sure there may be times when a little bit of luring may be necessary, but this will be phased out after one or two lures, depending on what you are teaching. But luring should be phased out very quickly or the dog will be relying on the lure, rather than thinking for himself “what can I do to get a click”. Anything can be used as a reinforcer....food, a toy, a pat or a “good dog”, as long as it is something your dog really enjoys & it FOLLOWS the click. Whatever your dog enjoys the most, use as your reinforcer. But in the early stages of clicker training a new behaviour, food is often the best reward.

GETTING STARTED You first need to get your dog familiar with the concept of CT ie. you need to “load” the clicker. To do this you need a plentiful supply of yummy treats cut up into tiny pieces. You are going to be feeding a lot of treats, so make sure they are tiny, about the size of a pea. You can use your dog’s kibble if it is small & your dog really likes it. I am fortunate that my dogs really love their kibble, so for clicker work inside the house, on the carpet, I like to use part of our dog’s dinner (kibble), but for outside work I will most likely use homemade soft treats, like the ideas listed on my website

<http://www.grevilleacottagebordercollies.com/diy-equipment--treats.asp> Just remember that if you are doing a lot of training with treats, then this needs to be taken into consideration at dinner time, or you will end up with an overweight dog.

Obviously you are going to need a clicker, which can be purchased on-line or from pet shops, or if you are lucky, I have given you one. You can even use a retractable ball point pen, but it could get a little clumsy. Don’t hold the clicker too close to your dog as the noise may startle or frighten him at first. If you find he is startled by the click, try softening the noise by putting it behind your back, in your pocket or put several layers of sticky tape over the ball.

I am sure you are going to ask, “Why can’t I just use my voice?” There are several reasons for this. Firstly you need to click (mark) the EXACT moment the dog does a desired movement, which may be as small as turning an ear towards the object. The clicker is more precise & timely than using a marker word, like “yes” or “good boy”. Secondly, for the clicker to retain it’s value as a marker, you need to treat EVERY time

you click, even if you make an untimely mistake. If you were using “yes” for example, then every time you said the “yes” word, you would need to treat your dog, & that is impossible, so the marker word would lose its value. Thirdly, the tone of the clicker never changes, whereas the tone of a marker word or words can be said in many tones, depending on what mood you are in, for example, if you tired, excited or a little peased off that the session is not going quite as planned. Its important, that if you are getting a little moody, then better to end the session by letting your dog do something that he knows, click & have a party. End of session. Do not even start to train if you are feeling tired or moody.

Marker words certainly have their place but cannot take the place of the clicker in shaping a new behaviour. I reserve my marker words like “yes” for when a dog knows the behaviour that it has already been taught with the clicker & performs it correctly. For example, when the dog enters correctly in the weave poles or takes the correct obstacle in a discrimination, or does a lovely 2on 2off on the dogwalk. When your dog really gets the hang of CT, he will love it so much that you will only have to take the clicker out of your pocket & he will immediately start offering behaviours & will really look forward to training & working with you. You can't do the same with a marker word...**you can't take a “yes” out of your pocket.**

LOADING THE CLICKER This first session is best done on a surface where your dog can immediately find the treat...you don't want any sniffing around. So you have your dog, & lots of small tasty treats & your clicker in hand. You “load” the clicker by throwing a treat on the ground, your dog goes over to investigate, & before he can pick it up, you click & he gets the treat on the ground. Throw another treat & the behaviour is repeated. It is important with CT that you say absolutely nothing & use no other cues to the dog. Keep throwing treats around & clicking, a split second **before** the dog picks it up. After a while, hold off throwing another treat & wait for your dog to look at you, immediately, click & throw the treat. Then repeat, wait for the dog to look at you, then click & throw. Your dog is beginning to learn that the click has marked a behaviour that pleases you & has started to “shape” behaviours, ie. “If I look at you, I will get a click”. Have a party, with lots of praise & pats & end of session. Don't be tempted to go click, click, click, in your excitement or the dog will not know precisely what he did to earn it & the clicker will lose its value. Keep the session short & finish up before the dog loses interest. It is better to do a few 5 minute training sessions a day, all ending on a good note with the dog wanting more, than ½ an hour & the dog getting tired & distracted.

101 THINGS TO DO WITH A BOX The next exercise is to place a cardboard box in the middle of the room & be ready armed with your clicker & lots of tiny, tasty treats. Best to sit yourself in a chair & remember, no coaxing, no voice & no cues. Watch your dog very carefully & as soon as he shows any interest in the box, click & throw a treat. The interest may be simply turning in the general direction of the box. You may mark this a few times, then hold off till your dog offers something more or different, then C & T. He may take a step towards it... C & T. Two steps, C & T etc. etc. until he is really interacting with the box & he may decide to sniff it...C & T. Then he may put a paw inside... C & T. etc. etc. Keep the session short & end with a party ☺ Your dog is well on the way to learning how much fun it is to offer behaviours that will earn a click, followed by a treat.

PLACEMENT OF THE REWARD It is not important where you place the reward or if the dog has moved off the spot when the reward is given. Remember it is the CLICK that is marking the dog's precise moment, not when or where he receives the reward. In the above exercise, for example, I would be throwing the reward slightly away from the box, so the dog has to think back to what he was doing, when he got the click. If you throw the reward towards the box, then you are in fact luring the dog, & that is not what you want. You want the dog to use his brain & work out the puzzle himself, much the same as the party game “hot & cold” except we don't use any non-reward marker, he just only gets the click when he is “hot”, & no click when he is “cold”.

There may be times when it is not convenient to throw the reward away from the object. For example, you are teaching your dog to crawl under a chair & crawl out the other side. You would firstly click & throw the treat slightly away for ANY interaction your dog made with the chair, (turning an ear or looking at it). After a while he may lower his head & look under the chair, which is a BIG step. When he gets to the stage where he is half under the chair, I would click & throw the treat directly under his nose, so he doesn't come rushing out & maybe banging his head in the process. At any stage, you may end the session, lots of praise & have a party. When you come back to it later on, you will be surprised how much he remembered & will get straight into it. When he is fluently crawling under the chair, you may put a verbal cue on it, if you think it is a behaviour you may want to use later, along with other tricks.

Another example of placement of the reward... I am teaching my girl to stand on her back legs. This is not just a party trick, but is a good exercise for dogs to strengthen their rear ends, but must be taught in small sessions & built up over time. At first I hold a treat...(yes I am luring)...just above her head, far enough where she has to stand on her back legs to reach the treat. As soon as she stands, I click & throw her the treat to catch. It doesn't matter that she is back on all four legs, she knows that she was clicked for standing on her back legs. Gradually, I will require greater duration of the stand, before I click & throw the treat for her to catch. This is one behaviour where I have used a lure to get her started, & also introduced a verbal cue (high) & a physical cue (my hand high above her head). I added the cues early, so I could get rid of the lure & now she can concentrate on increasing duration. She now targets my hand instead of relying on a lure.

TEACH YOUR DOG TO PLAY "CATCH" WITH THE TREAT. This adds a whole new value to the clicker as the reward becomes so much more fun than just having it shoved in his mouth or picked up off the ground. Be careful of throwing smelly treats on the ground around agility equipment or in a training ground, as you may be teaching your dog to "sniff" if he can't immediately see the treat & it is distracting for other people's dogs. I only throw treats on the ground if I am on a surface where he doesn't have to sniff around to find it. If I am outside on the grass I will always play "catch" & if my aim is accurate, the treat will go straight into the dog's mouth instead of dropping on the ground where he has to sniff around to find it.

RESHAPING OR POLISHING AN ALREADY LEARNT BEHAVIOUR

I recently decided to re-teach our young boy the correct agility table performance. He had a perfect "table" before he started trialling...all taught with the clicker then put on cue. But because of his added excitement of running in a trial & thus overshooting the obstacle, combined with nerves on the part of his handler, that he must "stay" till released, he had started to actually stop before the table & showed no desire to jump up. In one very quick clicker session, I had him once again understanding what was required of him with the table. The whole session lasted no more than five minutes, because he had done it all before & the light bulb went on. He hadn't forgotten how to do the table, he had just been told to "wait" or "stay" that many times that he thought he had to do it BEFORE the table.

WHEN TO PUT THE BEHAVIOUR ON CUE Remember, that while you are shaping a behaviour, that it is important not to use any cues, both verbal or physical. The only times you will speak is to release him from the task with your release word, & when you have finished the session & you give lots of praise & throw a party, with him being the star. When you have shaped the whole behaviour & the dog is offering to perform it willingly & accurately, then it is time to put a verbal and/or physical cue on it. For instance, when he is fluently offering the whole behaviour of crawling under the chair & coming out the other side, I might add the cue "under chair" while he is performing it. When he completes it, I might say "Good, under chair" as he gets lots of treats.

Once you have taught the behaviour using the clicker & put a cue on it, you can then phase the clicker &

treats out & just use a good word or praise followed by a pat instead of a treat. If you feel the behaviour needs a bit of fine tuning, get the clicker back out.

GETTING YOUR TIMING PRECISE It is very important that you practice getting your timing with the click, spot on. You can practice this without the dog. Get someone to drop a ball & see if you can click the exact moment the ball touches the ground. While you are in the learning stages of CT it is best to train with your dog alone & without any distractions so you can concentrate on observing your dog's every movement enabling you can click the precise moment. I will use the "under chair" exercise as an example. When the dog looks at the chair, if you are late or too early with your click, you may in fact be marking his looking away from the chair which you don't want. With the "standing on back legs", if I am late with the clicker, then I may be marking her returning to the ground, which I don't want. Remember, the timing or placement of the reward is not important, but you must reward EVERY time you click. Even after you fine tune your clicking skills, there will be lots of times when you will be late or early with the click. Don't worry about this, the sky is not going to fall in, but remember you must treat the dog regardless & try to get it right the next time.

One of the best ways of learning to fine tune your click, is to teach your dog party tricks.

A FEW TRICK SUGGESTIONS for starters. As mentioned earlier, there is possibly nothing in the dog world that you can't teach with the clicker training system. A behaviour that has been shaped with the dog having to think to get a click, stays with the dog & is never forgotten, not weeks, months or even years later. I am assuming that you have probably already taught your dog the basics, of sit, drop, come etc, but if you haven't then now's the time. You can use the clicker to extend duration of a sit, stay, or drop or fine tune a sit.

One of the earliest tricks I taught my girl, using the clicker, was to walk backwards. Back end awareness is a good skill for the sporting or obedience dog to have. The way I did it, was I sat on the edge of a chair, knees apart & facing my dog...clicker & treats ready. I placed a treat under the chair between my heels. She went in to get the treat & while she was backing out, I clicked & placed the reward back under the chair. In she went again & I clicked as she was backing out, placing the treat further back this time. Within no more than a few minutes, the light bulb went on, & she worked out that she was getting clicked for moving backwards. A couple of sessions of this & then I hesitated, she then offered backward movement on her own to get the click. After I was confident, that she knew what she was doing to earn the click, I put a verbal cue on it of "back up". The way to get distance with this is to place an object on the floor a little way behind the dog, maybe a rolled up towel. When the dog offers his backup & his back feet touch the towel, you click & treat, then gradually start moving the towel further back & clicking when his back feet touch it each time. If you want the dog to back up in a straight line, then you will need some sort of barriers or do it next to a wall.

But remember, clicker training is not just about teaching your dog to do party tricks, most of what our dogs have learnt with agility has been done using a clicker. My first introduction to clicker training was when I attended a weekend work shop for Dancing With Dogs with my then, two year old border collie, Bindi. When the instructor demonstrated a shaping session with one of her dogs....it was like...WOW...can I really do that?? I have been hooked on it ever since. One of the best things about clicker training is that it not only teaches the dog a behaviour that it will never forget, but that it is heaps of fun for both you & your dog. So get clicking & enjoy the journey together..your dog will thank you for it 😊

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING "Clicker Training for Dogs...Getting Started" by Karen Pryor
"Control Unleashed" by Leslie Mcdevitt