

Clicker Training for Dogs

From dolphins to chickens to dogs, clicker training has developed into a positive, accurate way for humans to communicate with animals.

By Kim Campbell Thornton

Back in the day, when you watched Flipper perform amazing feats on television or oohed and aahed over the shows put on by killer whales at Sea World, you might have been surprised to learn that you could teach your dog tricks and behaviors using the very same technique that marine mammal trainers have found so successful: sound, treat, sound, treat.

It was in the 1960s that marine mammal trainers, led by Keller Breland, pioneered the use of what are known as conditioned reinforcers, usually the sound of a whistle, to train whales, dolphins, seals and polar bears. Breland called the whistle a bridging stimulus, because in addition to informing the dolphin that it had just earned a fish, the whistle bridged the period of time between the leap in midtank — the behavior that was being reinforced — and swimming over to the side to collect its pay.

The use of a signal that means “that’s it, here comes a reward” (a conditioned reinforcer) has been around much longer than clicker training per se, says Jean Donaldson, director of the Academy for Dog Trainers at the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), and author of the book *The Culture Clash* (James and Kenneth, 1997). “In the laboratories of American behaviorists, such as B.F. Skinner, in the 1940s and 1950s, the sound of a food dispenser functioned exactly like a clicker,” Donaldson says. “Marian Breland Bailey [one of Skinner’s graduate students], Keller Breland and Bob Bailey [her first and second husbands] were the first to apply what’s now called operant conditioning in the real world, training a huge variety of species for commercial, entertainment and military applications.”

Skinner first suggested using conditioned reinforcers to train dogs in the 1960s, but it wasn’t until 1992 that the idea really took off. That’s when behavioral biologist Karen Pryor, Ph.D.; dog trainer Gary Wilkes; and marine-mammal trainer Ingrid Shallenberger conducted a seminar in May of 1992 entitled “Don’t Shoot the Dog” for an audience of 250 dog trainers in San Francisco, California. They handed out little plastic clickers (a small box with a metal tongue that makes a clicking sound when pressed) to use as marker signals and conditioned reinforcers for desired behavior. Now, a little more than a decade later, clicker training has become a popular and positive force in dog training.

The Science Behind the Click

Clicker training combines two procedures known as classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning involves establishing that the sound of the click has meaning. (This method is most commonly associated with Pavlov’s experiments that took place in Russia in the early 1900s, in which dogs became conditioned to salivate every time Pavlov rang a bell because they associated it with mealtime.) The conditioned stimulus — the click sound — is paired with and follows the unconditioned stimulus — the sight of food, for instance — until the conditioned stimulus alone is enough to elicit the response: salivation, in the case of Pavlov’s dogs.

Classical conditioning is generally associated with unconscious or uncontrolled behaviors, such as salivation or increased heart rate. “Classical conditioning procedures are extremely effective in bringing about or eliciting emotion,” says John C. Wright, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist (C.A.A.B.) and professor of psychology at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. “What you do in clicker training to establish the value of the clicker is ‘click, treat, behave,’ ‘click, treat, behave’ and the ‘behave,’ is the eating of the treat. The cue is the click. It’s followed by a stimulus, which automatically elicits a good feeling from the dog. When the dog takes the treat, you have the association between the sound of the click, the presentation of the food and the dog taking the food.”

Think of it in terms of chocolate. If you know someone who loves chocolate and out of the blue you say, “Here’s a Hershey bar. You want it?” chances are good that her eyes will light up and a big smile will stretch across her face. That’s

because she's experiencing an immediate good feeling that results from having had chocolate before. She has, in fact, been classically conditioned to feel something positive when she hears the words "Hershey bar." In the same way, the clicker gets its value from a classical conditioning procedure. Once the clicker stands for "treat," you can use it to reinforce a voluntary behavior through operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning is defined as changing behavior by controlling its consequences. In other words, you're developing behavior that the dog does voluntarily and consciously with the knowledge that the action will bring a reinforcer. "Dogs continuously assess the immediate results of their actions — 'What did that get me?' — and do whatever works," Donaldson says.

"What do dogs want?" Freud might have asked. According to Donaldson, they want four things: to get good stuff (food, play, interesting smells, attention); to avoid losing that same good stuff; to avoid bad stuff (pain, scary noises, temperature extremes); and to stop bad stuff if it has already started. "Operant conditioning exploits all this," Donaldson says.

"Different philosophies of dog training emphasize different pieces of the above. For instance," Donaldson adds, "many trainers have migrated away from using the starting or stopping of bad stuff — pain, fear and startlement — because of their side effects, and because of the equally good results obtained by starting and stopping the good stuff — rewards. Twenty or 30 years ago, most dogs were choked, struck or shaken to be trained, but now these measures are increasingly rare as trainers learn more sophisticated mastery of reward and reward removal."