

Clicker Training Basics

Learn how to reinforce your dog's good behavior using a clicker device and its audio cues.

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Training methods vary from dog owner to owner. If your current method isn't quite clicking for you or your dog, give one a try that's worked for dolphins, dogs, birds, bunnies and other animals: clicker training. Named after the gadget used to produce the metallic "click" sound, clicker training advocates believe it's the best way to train a thinking dog.

With clicker training, you press the clicker when your dog behaves in a way you've wanted. In the beginning, you teach your dog that a click sound means he's getting a treat, so he forms a positive association with the sound. Over time and practice, the "click" itself becomes the reward, and your dog may even "offer" certain behaviors in hopes of a "click."

How does it work?

Based on the scientific concept of "operant conditioning," clicker training relies on the theory that we all, both animals and people, associate certain behaviors or events with a consequence, either good or bad. You've learned that if you drive the speed limit, you'll avoid the consequence of a ticket (negative). You've also learned that if you smile at a baby, she'll most likely smile back (positive). So what do you do? You keep repeating those positive behaviors.

With clicker training, you're teaching your dog that if he behaves the way you'd like him to, he'll be rewarded.

"A lot of training seems to be directed at solving behavior problems," says leading clicker expert Karen Pryor. "Clicker training is about training desirable behavior."

As you continue to reinforce the desired behavior — say, sitting — your dog will quickly learn to intentionally repeat that behavior to receive positive feedback from you. He'll be confident in his choices, and you'll have a trained pal.

With clicker training, you're "shaping" your dog's behavior. You use the clicker to let the dog know at the very second he performs an action that he's doing exactly what you'd like him to do. Pryor says clicking is like taking a picture of the desired behavior.

"The dog sits, and you click," she says.

Getting started

Ready to get clicking? The best way to jump in is through a class, video, or book so you're confident in your approach. Clickertraining.com is a helpful resource to start browsing.

When starting out, you'll click when your dog approximates a behavior — for example, as he's beginning to move in your direction when you say, "come." Next, when he figures out you want him to come closer, you'll click only when he passes that initial attempt. And finally, you'll only click when he's arrived and seated at your feet.

"Once they've learned that if they sit or come when called, you'll click, you don't have to click anymore," Pryor says. "It's not a maintenance tool. You can maintain it with a pat or a 'good dog.' It's a communication system, really."

Once you get started, you'll be able to teach simple behaviors and eventually move on to more complex, multi-step behaviors. Choose a behavior and break it down into many simple steps. Click for each approximation, working your way through the steps — and be patient. Training a dog isn't speedy, but you will be rewarded with a companion who is confident and well-behaved.

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