

Clickers, the ultimate communication tool when it comes to dog training

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How to mark the exact moment of your dog's success



If I could provide only one piece of advice when it comes to training it would be to start using a clicker as soon as you bring your new companion home. Developing the clicker association even at six or eight weeks of age is not too early. Once your pup is a little older, his or her more formal skills such as walking on a leash and recall, will already be partially developed. Adult dogs can learn this system of [communication](#) with ease as well.

Clicker training (otherwise known as the mark and reward system) is used to create a fast and reliable association between your command and when your dog's performed as requested.

The clicker tool has a great advantage over human speech because a dog's central nervous system can process the click many times faster than it can process a word. A spoken word must be recognized and interpreted before the dog understands that a behaviour is being marked. A click is processed instantly. It's thought that a click goes directly to the instinctive, reflexive part of a dogs brain (the amygdala) while a word is processed in the cortex (the thinking part of the brain), which takes longer.

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Once a dog is conditioned to a clicker, he will respond "reflexively" without having to stop and think about it.

Getting started

Suggestion: Perform the following exercise prior to a meal, not after, to keep the dog motivated.

Step 1.

Otherwise known as "**loading the clicker**", develops the association between the sound and the reward.

At home, start with 15 very small treats (cheerios, cheese, chicken, etc., something highly motivating). Make sure the pieces are small and soft. You will be doing rapid repetitions of this exercise so it's important the dog can consume the treats quickly.

Step 2.

Start with the dog in front of you. Hold the treats in one hand and the clicker tool in the other. Click and provide a treat within a half-second (hold the clicker behind you or at your side, not too close to the dog's ear). Do this about 15 times.

Your timing should be:

Click/treat, wait a beat; Click/treat; wait a beat, Click/treat, wait a beat...

Make sure the click comes before the treat, not after, and within that half-second window, for maximum effectiveness. Canine understanding only happens if a dog receives a reward within a half-second after attempting to do as you ask.

What we are doing is conditioning the dog to have an almost involuntary response to the sound of the clicker tool.

Step 3.

Perform this exercise twice a day for three days with your dog. By the fourth day he'll be whipping around corners in search of you. That's when you know your dog has learned the clicker system successfully.

Step 4.

Will be to expand the use of clickers for other commands. Once the dog is clicker conditioned, click for his attention, and treat only once when he responds.

Name recognition

Clickers work really well in conditioning a dog to get 'really excited' and to pay attention when they hear their name. It means they sit up and takes notice, anticipating the new request you're going to send their way.

For example: If conditioned properly, the dog will look up when he hears his name, waiting for the next command such as "come".

So...just like the loading exercise:

Step 1.

Start with the dog in front of you, treats in one hand, the clicker tool in the other.

Step 2.

Say his name, and perform the... *click/treat, wait a beat*; Say his name, then, *click/treat; wait a beat, say his name, then, click/treat, wait a beat* (do 10 or 15 repetitions in rapid succession).

Step 3.

Perform this exercise twice a day for three days. By the fourth day your dog will be snapping to attention when he hears the click, awaiting your next command.

What you've just taught him is that his name has great significance. Hearing his name means great things coming. His name is now synonymous with the click sound.

Step 4.

Eliminate the clicker as the use of his or her name now takes the place of the clicker sound:

- *Call his name then...*
- *Give the "come to me" command, and...*
- *When he complies, reward him*

Hide and seek

Once your dog responds reflexively to the clicker, reinforce his responsiveness by playing the hide and seek game.

Step 1.

Hide from your dog in your home, and click. When he or she finds you, provide the reward.

Make it easy for him or her to find you at first, then make it a little harder. Once they're good at the game, practise by adding in their name:

Hide:

- call his name/click and treat if he finds you
- call his name/click and treat if he finds you
- call his name/click and treat if he finds you

Step 2.

Once he's good at the name game practise by calling his name only:

- call his name and treat if he finds you
- call his name and treat if he finds you
- call his name and treat if he finds you

So next time you're at the pet store, find the clickers and pick one up. For the cost of a toonie you'll reap the life-long pay off in great training skills with your dog.

THE DOG BLOG is a great resource for tips on training and canine well being. Got questions or a topic in mind? Let me know via the comments box. I would love to hear from you.

Comments



Larry Wyte 10 August, 2020

I am interested in trying some clicker training with my dog. Styles and prices range a fair bit. Are there advantages to any one particular style of clicker?



Teresa Fordman 10 August, 2020

I know this is a bit off topic but I am very interested in trying some training with my cat using a clicker. Any thoughts on technique? Would the training be the same for a cat or different?

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