

# Clicker Training Your Dog

**Clicker training** uses a distinct and consistent signal to mark a desired behaviour in real time and then follows that signal with a motivating reward. Because animals understand precisely which action earned the click and their reward, they learn new behaviours quickly, easily, and enthusiastically.

You can clicker train any kind of animal, of any age. Puppies love it. Old dogs learn new tricks. You can clicker-train cats, birds, horses, fish and other pets as well. Here are some simple tips to get you started.

## **1 Understand positive reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement is a method of training based around giving rewards for good behaviour, instead of punishment for bad behaviour. Clicker training is a kind of positive reinforcement training, because you do not punish or physically control the dog. Instead, you offer rewards for good behaviour.

## **2 Understand how clicker training works**

The "clicker" is a small noisemaker that makes a distinctive "click" sound when the metal tab is pressed. The clicker is intended to tell your dog when he or she does something correctly. Once you've trained your dog to associate the clicker with rewards, he or she will quickly learn that when she performs a behaviour and you click, (s)he will receive a reward. This means that your dog will be an active participant in the training process, instead of just being forced into position. The key to using a clicker is to use it at the exact moment that your dog performs the expected behaviour.

- Remember that the clicker is not the reward. The clicker is intended to mark which behaviour is correct, not to reward behaviour. You'll have to reward your dog with a treat after you click, because the treat is the reward.
- The advantage of clicker training is that it allows you to be more precise in your timing than if you have to say "Good Boy/Girl!" Additionally, the clicker makes a very distinctive sound that dogs will easily recognize, and that you will not use in casual conversation.
- You could think of the clicker like the winning buzzer on a game show—the noise signals the exact moment that the correct behaviour or action is being performed.

- With the clicker, your dog will learn two main things—the exact moment that he is doing the right thing, and that a treat always comes after the click.



### 3 Load the clicker

Before you can use the clicker for training you need to teach your dog what the clicker means to him. This is known as "Loading" or "Charging" the clicker.

To load the clicker, simply click the clicker and give your dog a treat. If you repeat this frequently, your dog will soon learn to associate the click with a reward. Don't worry if your dog is initially startled by the click - once he or she realises treats come after the click, (s)he will adjust to the noise.



- You will need at least a handful of treats or your dogs regular food (dinner is perfect), since you will be practicing this over and over.

- Repeat this several times. Vary the amount of time that you hold the treat in your hand before using the clicker so that your dog does not begin to expect when the treat will come.
- If your dog wants to sniff and try to get at the treat, keep your hand closed and wait until he loses interest in the treat before using the clicker.

Test your dog to see if he has made the association between the click and the reward by waiting until your dog turns away a little and then clicking once. If he turns to look at you straight away expecting a treat – success! If not, it just means he hasn't really made the association yet so just keep going by clicking and treating, (one click – one treat). All dogs learn at different rates and you may have to do this 20-30 times or more.

When you clicker train, use very small treats. You'll want to use a soft treat that your dog can quickly eat. You can use thinly sliced hot dog, small pieces of cheese, or very small training treats - use a delicious treat at first.

Portion out what your dog eats each day so that you do not feed too much. Try working with your dog before he/she is fed.

A full dog may not be as interested in working for food. Eventually, the dog's mealtime can become a session of rehearsing commands it already knows, or while teaching new things.

## **4 Practice your timing**

Correct timing is essential to clicker training: remember, the click marks the correct behaviour. For example, if you're trying to train your dog to sit, clicking after your dog has already gotten up from the sitting position is going to train him/her to stand on command!

Try hard to click during the desired behaviour, not after it is completed.



## Training with the clicker

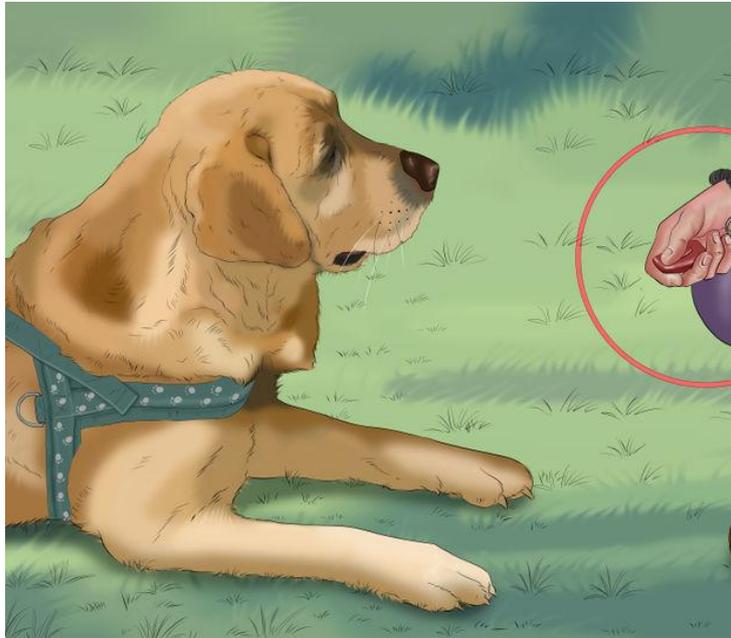
Once your dog has learned what to expect with the sound of the clicker, you can use it to train him to do different commands (e.g. sit, down, stay). It's best to train him in quiet location without other people or distractions around at first.

## 5 "Catching" correct behaviours

One method of clicker training is called "Catching" – you click as soon as you catch your dog doing a good behaviour.

Instead of using physical force to put your dog in a certain position, you can just wait until you see your dog is performing the action you want to reward.

For example, if he's in the room with you and he chooses to lie down quietly you can click and immediately throw him a treat. This reinforces to him that he is doing the right thing which will encourage him to repeat the behaviour.



## 6 “Shaping” behaviours

Shaping is the process of training very small steps at a time that, together, eventually build up in to a more complex behaviour.

To better understand how to use shaping, try playing the shaping game:

- Find a willing friend, and tell the friend that you are going to teach him/her to perform an action using shaping.
- Decide on a behaviour (but don't tell the friend what it is!) and ask your friend to walk around and do random things in the hopes that one behaviour is correct.
- Your job is to recognize small behaviours that you can build up to create the complete behaviour.

For example, you can "train" your friend to flip a switch:

- Start by clicking the clicker when your friend walks in the direction of the switch.
- Continue rewarding him or her for walking towards the switch, until s/he reaches the wall.
- Next, reward him or her for touching the wall.
- Soon your friend will realize that flipping the switch is the correct behaviour - click and reward her!

Remember not to punish your friend (or your dog) if she or he performs a wrong action. If your subject does something wrong, just ignore it and wait until (s)he does something correct to reward, helping him or her if necessary.

As an example lets imagine we want to train your dog to lie down in a specific area:

- First you would click and reward him as soon as he turns his body in the direction of that area.

Then click and reward him at each small step:

- beginning to walk to the new spot,
- arriving at the new spot,
- starting to lie down,
- and fully lying down on the floor.

By using the clicker and reward at each small step, you will be providing him with continual positive reinforcement as he is learning the new behaviour. He will think that this learning is fun and will likely perform the new behaviour with eagerness.

You may need to practice each step of the new behaviour over and over again before moving to the next small step.

## 7 Using a food lure

Another way of getting correct behaviours is to gently move your dog into the correct position.

You may coax or lure into a movement or position, but don't push, pull, or hold your dog. Instead, let him discover how to do the behaviour on his own.

If you want to train your dog to sit, for example, hold the treat above your dog's nose. As he moves his nose up, he should end up sitting on the floor. Remember, you should never force your dog to get the correct behaviour - e.g. yanking on the lead to stop pulling, this will often result in fear and confusion and will not help you bond with your dog.

A food lure is commonly used when training a dog to lie down.

- For this behaviour, you would hold the treat right in front of your dog's nose and slowly move the treat down to the floor.
- Your dog will follow the treat down.
- When his elbows hit the floor, immediately click and reward him with the treat.
- When you see that your dog consistently responds with the food lure, remove the food lure but continue to hold your hand in front of his nose as if you have a treat.

When he lies down, immediately use the clicker and give him a treat with the other hand.

- Eventually, your dog will learn how to lie down by following only your hand signals without the lure of a treat.

The “lure” method can sometimes be quicker than the “shaping” or “catching” methods.

## **7 Learn how to add a verbal cue to a behaviour.**

Whether you have captured, shaped or lured a behaviour the next step is to add a verbal cue.

Let’s say you’ve taught your dog to lie down using a food lure and now he is quickly following your hand signal and lying down.

To add a verbal cue which means ‘lie down’ you say the cue word first and then give your hand signal. It’s really important that you say the new cue word first quite distinctly and pause for a second before you then give your hand signal. If you say it at the same time as the hand signal your dog will only notice the hand signal, he won’t really hear the word.

As soon as he does the behaviour, in this case lying down, click and reward him with a treat.

Your verbal cue should be short and direct, such as "sit" or "down." Sentences, such as "Be a good boy and stay" or "Roll over for mummy" would be too long.

Be super strict with yourself and make sure that you give the verbal cue *before* your dog does the behaviour so that he knows to listen for your command and then respond to it.

Remember to use the cues consistently. For example, you might train your dog to lie down on command and also to jump off a sofa. Instead of using the cue "down" for both, try using the command "down" for lying down and "off" for going off the sofa.

You can also use visual cues, such as a raised hand for "sit." Both verbal and hand signal cues can work well, as long as you remember to be consistent!

## **8 Begin clicker training your dog.**

Once you've learned the basic concepts of clicker training, you can start training your dog.

A good choice is to try training your dog to look at you, which will help you keep your dog's attention on you when you train.

- Sit in front of your dog and hold the clicker in your left hand and a treat in your right hand. Hold the treat in front of your dog's nose and move it in one smooth movement up to your eyes.
- As your dog's eyes follow the treat up to your eyes click and treat.
- Repeat this exercise 8-10 times, and then say "Watch!" or "Look!" first before you move the treat.
- Keep saying the word then giving the hand signal until your dog starts to anticipate and responds as soon as you say the word.
- Being able to focus your dog's attention on you by telling him or her "Watch!" or "Look!" is really useful in distracting environments.

## **9 Fix bad behaviours by clicking good behaviours**

For example, instead of shouting at your dog for barking, try clicking the clicker when your dog is quiet.

You can gradually desensitise your dog to the sound of knocking and the doorbell, people coming in the house, and strangers knocking at the door using clicker training.

Train your dog to walk nicely on the lead by clicking when the lead is slack, instead of yanking on the lead when your dog pulls ahead of you. Remember that you should never punish your dog: clicker training is supposed to be fun and bonding for both of you.

## **10 Keep practice sessions short**

Dogs have short attention spans - especially puppies! - you'll get the most out of your training if you train for five minutes three times a day, instead of training without break for an hour a day.

You can also liven up training sessions by including a game of fetch or tug-of-war.

If your dog is frustrated with a new behaviour or isn't making progress, throw in a few tricks he or she knows well to keep the treats flowing. Your dog will be upset and bored if (s)he doesn't get rewards for his/her work - keep goals easy and achievable.

Stay calm and positive when you train. Your job is to be your dog's coach and cheer him along - don't get angry or frustrated. If you start feeling annoyed or upset, take a breather or play a game with your dog.

If you are not making progress with a particular behaviour, you are probably clicking too late. Accurate timing is important. Get someone else to watch you, and perhaps to click for you, a few times.

## **11 Most of all have fun!**

Enjoy bonding with your dog and learning more about clicker training!