



What You Need to Know About Clicker Training

CLICKER

What is a clicker?

A clicker is used to “mark” a behaviour. It acts as a bridge between the behaviour and the reward. The clicker will tell your dog: “yes, that is the behaviour I want from you and I will reward you for it”.

How do I properly use a clicker?

First we must condition a response to the sound it makes. This is called Classical Conditioning. This means that every single time the dog hears the clicker; they automatically know they will be receiving a reward.

Think about using the clicker like you would use a camera. When you click, you are essentially taking a picture of the desired behaviour (i.e. sit, down, touch, paw, place etc.).

The clicker will be used to mark desired behaviours that you are training for the first 4-6 weeks or until your dog’s behaviours are consistent and fluent (they can do them any place, any time).

Why use a clicker?

A clicker is a completely neutral and novel sound. Verbal markers are much more difficult for two reasons:

1. We use words such as “good”, “nice”, “OK” or “yes” in our everyday conversations. This means we are not necessarily rewarding our dog every time the marker is used and it loses its value.
2. Clickers take tone of voice and facial expressions out of the equation. This makes it more consistent for your dog when they are first learning.



Will I have to use the clicker forever?

No. The clicker can eventually be phased out by pairing the word “relax” with the use of the clicker. Pretty soon the word relax will become synonymous with the sound of the clicker.

TEACHING BEHAVIOURS

Because our dogs do not speak English, we have to teach them the words that are associated with the things we would like them to do (or not do)!

- The first step is to **WAIT** for the behaviour. Grab a handful of treats and designate it for one single behaviour only. Every time they do the behaviour click and toss your treat. Allow them to come back over to you and to problem solve as to how they got you to click and treat them the last time.
- Once they are consistent with this particular behaviour, we can start **NAMING** the behaviour. As they are doing the desired behaviour, you will say the name of it in conjunction with using the hand-signal. Not before, and not after, but **as** they are doing it. This will allow your dog to learn the word associated with the behaviour.
- Make sure your dog is consistent with this before moving on to the next step of **CUEING** the behaviour (asking for it). When cueing the behaviour, ask your dog for the behaviour verbally and with your hand signal. Once they do the behaviour you can click and treat.

Why is it important to use a hand signal as well as a verbal cue?

Dogs are very good at reading our body language. In fact, they are much better at reading our body language than learning verbal cues. It is important that they learn both together so that eventually you can use just one or the other.

My dog will only do a cued behaviour at home but not outside.

Dogs do not generalize well. So what they can do at home in your living room may not translate to a friend’s house or the dog park. There are also a lot more distractions to contend with. You will need to slowly increase your dog’s duration and distraction. Eventually you can change environments, cue them from a distance or surrounded by distractions etc. Remember, when



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dealing with a higher distraction, we need to up the ante. This means very high value rewards, so high that they are better than the sights and smells going on around them.

When can I start decreasing the amount of treats I give my dog during training sessions?

Once your dog can consistently do a behaviour (<80% of the time), we can begin to reward them variably. This means that sometimes we have a treat; sometimes we just have a pat on the neck or verbal praise. Start by only offering a food reward every second time, and slowly increase the variance. If your dog's behaviours are truly learned, they will do the behaviours with or without reward. It acts somewhat like a VLT machine. Sometimes they get a pay-out, sometimes not -- but this time just might be the time they get something tasty, so they do the behaviour regardless.