



PAWS[®] CHICAGO

TRAINING PROTOCOLS | Clickers

Clicker Training Basics

WHAT IS CLICKER TRAINING?

Clicker training is a positive reinforcement training system, based on the principals of classical and operant conditioning, that incorporates the use of a marker signal (the click) to tell a dog precisely what it was doing right at that point in time. This allows us to build behaviors we want the dog to acquire.

WHAT IS A CLICKER?

A clicker is a small plastic noisemaker that makes the sound of a “click” used to mark desirable behaviors. In itself, it has no meaning to the dog but paired with a reward it becomes a powerful training tool. Clickers are inexpensive and can be purchased at most pet stores and online.

WHY CAN'T I JUST SAY “GOOD DOG” WHEN MY DOG DOES SOMETHING RIGHT?

As an event marker, the clicker becomes uniquely attached to your dog’s successful performance. Since it is used as a training tool, it allows the handler to mark a behavior with greater precision and more consistency than we can do with our voice.

WHY IS POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT SO IMPORTANT?

Positive reinforcement will speed up your training process, while it strengthens the bond between you and your dog. We are able to avoid punishment or negative tools because they are simply unnecessary while we are teaching important life skills; and punishment can cause the dog fear or conflict. Reinforcing a behavior will make that behavior occur with more frequency while keeping the dog happy and engaged. Our results will be a confident and enthusiastic learner.

What you need to get started

- A buckle or martingale collar
- A 5 to 6 ft. training leash
- A clicker
- Many small treats that your dog really loves
- A pouch or bait bag to hold your treats
- A mat or bed that your dog can lie on
- A chew toy, rawhide, bully stick or stuffed Kong toy (with peanut butter or wet dog food) to work with relaxation on a mat or bed



Treat bag and treats



Clicker



Leash and collar

Getting Started

The premise of clicker training is quite simple; you see the behavior you want to reinforce, you mark it with a click, and you reward the behavior.

Step 1

Find out what treats your dog really loves. If the dog doesn't really want the reward, it will not be motivated to learn. Use small, soft treats that the dog can easily chew and swallow instead of hard, large treats that will cause it to lie down and chew. If the dog's diet allows, small pieces of cut up cheese, chicken, hotdogs or other special food is great. Always train before a meal when your dog is hungry and alert!

Step 2

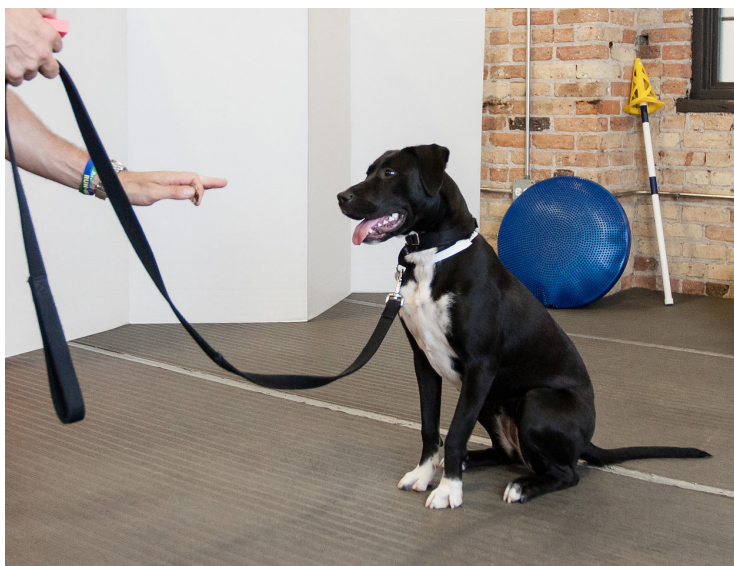
Measure about ten treats in your one hand and have the clicker in the other. Simply click and then give your dog a treat. The treat should be delivered in a distinctly separate physical motion from the click (keeping your treat hand behind your back until after you click will help). If the treat hand is in motion, the dog will focus on the food; and the impact of the click will be diluted. The treat must also be delivered immediately (within a second) after the click. This will ensure that the click leaves a strong impact on the dog. Repeat this process over the next couple days (you can do multiple sets of 10, but quit before your dog loses interest) until your dog can predict that the click means that a reward will follow.

Step 3

Decide what behavior you want to mark. Knowing this ahead of time will help you sharpen your observation skills in order to "capture" the desired behavior. Pick an easy behavior your dog does naturally; such as making eye contact, sitting, or a cute head tilt. Click one time, the moment the behavior occurs, and then reinforce with a treat. Don't worry if you accidentally click at the beginning, just be sure to deliver the treat. A treat always follows a click to keep the dog's association between the click and the reward strong.

Step 4

Once your dog starts to repeat the desired behavior multiple times in anticipation of the click/reward, you are ready to attach a cue, teaching the dog it will be rewarded for a specific behavior. Try to attach the cue a split second before your dog performs the behavior (click and treat) for several repetitions. Then randomly cue the behavior; click and reward when your dog responds.



CONGRATULATIONS!

You have just taught your dog something new by capturing the behavior, marking and reinforcing the behavior, and then putting the behavior on cue. Now you can practice capturing other desirable behaviors and putting them on cue, while increasing the lines of communication between you and your dog. Remember to keep all training sessions short and upbeat. Try to end the session while your dog is still interested and engaged. He'll remember the fun when you start your next training session.

Basic Skills

SIT

When you are teaching and reinforcing your dog for sitting, you are teaching a basic skill that can help with proper greetings and manners at mealtimes. A dog with a reliable sit is easier to manage while leashing to go for a walk and passing through doorways. When a dog is consistently reinforced for sitting when greeting people, it forgets it was ever fun to jump up on them in the first place.

Step 1

With your dog's favorite treat in your hand, bring the treat to your dog's nose and raise your hand slowly (without losing contact with the dog's nose) over its head. This should bring its rear to the floor in a sit position. When the dog is sitting, give it the treat. Repeat several times until your dog easily sits as the treat is raised.

Step 2

After you have lured your dog into sit multiple times; stand upright in front of your dog with a treat ready behind your back (or in a treat bag) and your clicker in the other hand. When your dog offers a sit on its own, click while the behavior is occurring; and follow immediately with a treat. **If your dog doesn't sit at this time, go back to the lure for several more repetitions.*

Step 3

Put the behavior on cue by saying "sit" right when your dog begins the action of sitting (always click and reinforce the behavior). After multiple repetitions, give the "sit" cue randomly, then click and reinforce when your dog responds.



At Home Fun

- Capture, click and reinforce sits your dog does spontaneously (if you don't have your clicker, you can respond with a verbal marker such as the word "yes" with some praise and a treat).
- Begin to cue a sit in real life situations such as before meals, when clipping the leash on, before petting and when going through the door. Soon you will notice that your dog will automatically sit while waiting in these everyday situations.
- Ask your dog to sit before you greet it after returning home.
- Practice a sit in different rooms and with familiar family members or friends in the room. Put a leash on your dog and practice a sit when a familiar family member or friend enters the room.
- Practice outdoors at street corners and before getting into the car.
- Practice a "sit" cue while approaching a person. Practice greeting people outdoors by asking for a sit before allowing interaction.

Basic Skills



At Home Fun

- Ask for a brief moment of eye contact, “watch,” before throwing ball or toy, opening the door to go out for a walk or before putting down the food bowl at mealtimes. These “real life” situations can be considered resources to your dog. Soon you should see your dog checking in with you more frequently as it realizes that good behavior is expected and will be followed by something fun or pleasant.

WATCH

Making eye contact and giving attention on cue is unnatural for most dogs, but it makes training so much easier if your dog can give you attention on cue.

Step 1

Have your clicker and treats ready when moving around the house. Say your dog’s name and click when it turns its head to check in. Try the same thing while on a leash walk outdoors.

Step 2

Put your dog on leash in a quiet room, and keep it close by stepping on the leash. Have your clicker and treats ready and when your dog looks up at you (even for a split second), capture the eye contact with a click and reward. Repeat until you see that your dog is offering the behavior to get the click and treat.

Step 3

Put the behavior on cue by saying “watch” as the behavior begins. Repeat multiple times, always clicking as the behavior occurs and following with a treat. Take a short break and then try giving the “watch” cue to see if your dog responds with the correct behavior.

Step 4

After several days of practicing “watch,” you are ready to teach your dog to respond in the presence of a light distraction. With your dog in front of you, hold the treat off to the side. Your dog’s gaze will follow the hand with the treat. Give your “watch” cue, and wait for your dog to respond by making eye contact, even for a split second. Try to click while the watch behavior is occurring (this will put your observation skills to the test) and follow with the treat. Repeat until your dog can easily move its gaze away from the treat hand and make solid eye contact on cue (this could take a few sessions, so be patient).

Basic Skills

TOUCH

When your dog learns to touch your hand on cue, it is practicing the skill of **targeting**. This important skill can serve as a foundation to help teach other behaviors or even some fun tricks. Using a target, such as a hand touch, is a good way to get a frightened dog past a scary object or to desensitize a dog to a frightening situation. It can also be used to help us teach a dog to move from point A to point B or to go over an obstacle.

Step 1

Start in a quiet place with your dog in front of you (put your dog on leash if necessary and then step on the leash to keep it near). Have your clicker in one hand and the other hand behind your back. Quickly take the hand from behind your back and place it about ¼ of an inch from your dog's nose with an open palm. Your dog should reach forward slightly and touch your hand. Click at the precise time it touches your hand, then reach into your treat pouch and deliver a treat. Repeat several times.

Step 2

Put the behavior on cue by saying "touch" as your dog is reaching for your hand. Watch your timing to be sure that you are clicking simultaneously to your dog's touch.

Step 3

After practicing your "touch" cue for several sessions, start to place your hand a little farther away from your dog's nose so it has to move a greater distance. Increase the distance in small increments, making sure your dog is having success.

Step 4

Go back to your beginning point and try moving your hand, again in small increments, to the right, left, up and down. Always be aware that if you go too fast, your dog may become confused.



At Home Fun

- After your dog is familiar with the "touch" cue, you can change the cue to "say Hi" for a cute trick. Simply put the new cue "say Hi" in front of the old cue "touch" as you put out your open palm for several repetitions. Gradually fade out the old cue (touch) and your dog will learn to do the behavior on the new cue, "say Hi."
- Teach your dog to come when called by using a target. Increase the distance from your dog while practicing the "touch" cue. When your dog is fluent and reliable from several feet, change the cue to by putting the new cue "come" in front of the old cue "touch" for several repetitions. Gradually fade out the old cue and your dog will learn to come to your open palm when it hears the cue "come."

Basic Skills



DOWN

Teaching a dog to lie down and relax is an important skill for living in a home environment.

Step 1

Start with your dog in a sit (you can kneel next to your dog if it's easier) and hold a treat to your dog's nose. Very slowly bring the treat down along your dog's chest to the floor. Click and drop the treat between your dog's front feet when it lies down.

Step 2

Repeat several times giving the "down" cue as your dog is following the treat to the ground. Continue to click and drop the treat between your dog's feet when it lies down.

Step 3

Take the treat between your thumb and forefinger. Turn your hand so your dog only sees the top of your hand and not the treat. Give your "down" cue and slowly move your hand (with the treat hidden) to the ground. Click and release the treat when your dog's elbows hit the ground.

Step 4

Now you can start alternating having the treat and not having the treat in your hand so that your dog is responding to the hand signal cue instead of the treat. Make sure to click and reinforce your dog as soon as its elbows touch the ground. After a few sessions your goal is to fade the lure completely and reinforce consistently when your dog responds to your cue.

Step 5

Once you've faded out the lure, gradually work on giving your cue from an upright position so your dog doesn't rely on your bending over to give the cue. Always give your verbal cue, "down," a second before you start your hand signal, giving your dog a chance to start responding to the verbal cue.

At Home Fun

- If your dog can respond consistently to the "down" cue, teach your dog to go directly into the down position without going through sit. You can do this by walking next to your dog with a treat in your hand and then bringing the treat directly to the ground between your dog's front legs as you give the cue "down". Click and reward as soon as your dog is completely down. Repeat multiple times. Each time you should see that your dog's response is faster.
- Take your dog's favorite toy engage your dog with some fast-playful movements without allowing it to have it. When you see it really wants the toy, stop moving and give your "down" cue. As soon as your dog is down, toss the toy for it to retrieve. This should speed up its response even more!
- Alternate give your dog the "sit" and "down" cue, clicking and rewarding the correct response. Teach your dog to move from the down to sit position with a lure and then back down again. Now you have puppy "push-ups!"

Basic Skills



MAT TRAINING

Once your dog has mastered a “down,” you can start to teach it to go to a mat or bed and relax. This is an important skill that teaches your dog to settle and is a good way to foster independence. Your goal is that your dog learns to relax on its mat or bed for 20-30 minutes while you watch TV, read a book or cook dinner!

Step 1

Start by placing a mat or bed in a convenient place on the floor. Be ready with your clicker and treats. Click and reward any interest your dog shows in the mat/bed. This can be a look or movement towards the bed. *To speed up your progress, reinforce your dog after the click by tossing the treat directly onto the mat/bed.

Step 2

In small increments, reward any movement towards the bed. Raise your criteria slowly to one foot on the mat/bed, 2 feet on the mat/bed, 3 feet on the mat/bed until your dog is putting all 4 feet consistently on the bed. This may take you several sessions to achieve. *This technique is known as “shaping” and is used to build more complex behaviors.

Step 3

Once your dog is consistently offering to go to the mat/bed, you can start to cue the behavior by saying “Go to place” and then rewarding. Gradually increase the amount of time your dog must stay on the mat/bed before you click and treat.

Step 4

Now you’re ready to add distance, one step at a time, to the exercise. While you are adding distance, decrease the amount of time (duration) the dog is required to stay on the mat/bed so that you are focusing on one discipline at a time. This will make learning easier for the dog. *If you run into trouble at this point, go back to the last place you had success and increase your criteria more slowly. Don’t rush; this exercise will take several sessions to complete.

Step 5

Now you’re ready to add a “down” to all of this. Go back to the beginning by standing close to the mat/bed. Give your cue “Go to place.” Instead of clicking when your dog steps on the mat/bed, cue your dog to “down.” **If your dog is not 100% proficient with its down, go ahead and lure the down and then jackpot by dropping multiple treats between its front feet. Before the dog jumps up, try to drop several more treats between its front feet to encourage it to stay longer.*

- Once your dog is automatically giving you a “down,” start to increase the amount of time it must stay in this position before the click and treat. Then increase by small increments the distance away from the mat/bed.
- Remember to keep all sessions short, only 20-30 repetitions, and to quit while your dog is engaged and still having fun. Pick up your mat/bed when you are done with the exercise as a signal that training is finished.