

# Advanced training: Clicker training



Clicker training, a form of positive reinforcement, has become a very popular dog training method in recent years and clickers themselves are widely available. Some dog training clubs offer classes and workshops dedicated to clicker training, and there are a number of books and publications all about the method. As with all things, to be effective and positive, it needs to be used correctly.



## What is a clicker?

A clicker is a small plastic hand-held device with a strip of metal inside that makes a clear 'click' when pressed. They may be a box or rounded, with an indent or button. They have been around for more than 40 years, and have been used with a wide variety of animals. Clickers were first used with large marine animals such as killer whales - there is no need to explain why these animals can not be physically man-handled into position! When used correctly, clicker training is a very clear method of communication with an animal. This 'hands-off' training method gives dogs the freedom to exhibit and offer a variety of behaviours during training. The end result is a dog who is happy and confident in their own ability. Clicker training helps mentally stimulate your dog (which is all-important in their day-to-day life) and also helps to develop a strong bond between owner and dog.

## How do I use it?

**Step 1: Pair the 'click' with a treat** - The clicker in itself is not a reward straight away. The first thing you need to do when you start is to pair the 'click' with a treat so that your dog understands that 'click' means reward. Once your dog is looking for a treat every time they hear the 'click' you can start using the clicker to train behaviours. When training, it is important that you treat every time you click - even if you press the clicker by mistake.

**Step 2: Use a visual prompt suitable for the task you are teaching** - Dogs will not instinctively know what we are asking them to do, visual prompts give them a clue that there is something they need to do in order to get the 'click' and the reward e.g. Sticker for nose nudge, flat target board for teaching a paw push, or a flannel for head rest. We want to set our dog up for success by making it clear and obvious.

**Step 3: Shaping (or the 'hotter or colder' game) - maximum of 3 minute training sessions** - When you begin training your dog, you will first notice 'trial-and-error' learning, where our dogs are trying to understand what they must do to get a reward. We need to adopt a step-by-step approach, asking for a little at a time, using the clicker to gradually shape the behaviour that we are aiming for. Set up situations where the dog is likely to accidentally offer a behaviour that gets you on your way to achieving your end goal e.g. when teaching the head rest, placing a flannel on a chair and placing a treat on the flannel so every time they touch the flannel with their chin, you can click and give them another reward.



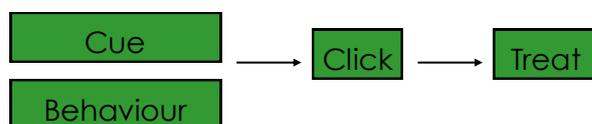
## How do I use it (Continued...)

**Step 4: Build on the behaviour** - Gradually build on the behaviour you are teaching. If the dog enters their training session (again a maximum of 3 minutes) where you left off and is showing confident responses, you are ready to move the behaviour on. You can move a behaviour on by holding off clicking to see if they offer other behaviour closer to your end goal e.g. when teaching a nose nudge, you have been clicking for just looking at the sticker, hold off on your click to see if they offer a nudge at the sticker or move closer to it. If they don't, stay at the level you are at.

**Step 5: Test the behaviour** - Move the visual prompt around to check they really understand the task.

**Step 6: Bring in your volunteer** - Once your dog is confident, find a volunteer that is willing to help you by making the situation as realistic as you can e.g. exhibiting some of the behaviours children may be showing at the time you are likely to be asking the dog to perform the task. Build these behaviours really slowly, you should have already covered them in your 'gradual introductions' with the dog. Also remember your dog 'fiddle' behaviours from Workshop 2 to make sure your dog is confident with the task.

**Step 7: Introduce you verbal command** - Once your dog has the desired behaviour established and is confident, add your verbal cue. To begin with, give the cue at the time they are doing the desired behaviour to establish the association between the cue you give, and them doing the desired behaviour for their reward. At this point you can also start to remove the visual prompt e.g. removing the sticker on your volunteer's leg if teaching nose nudge.



**Step 8: Remove the clicker** - Once a task has been taught you can wean off the use of the clicker, using verbal praise and a treat in its place. Your dog should now be ready to be asked to do the task around the child. If at any point your dog shows apprehension, go back a stage in your training to where they were confident and build on from there.

## Problems with progress

It can be easy to make mistakes with timing when training our dogs, or use too much language. The 'click' acts as a precise marker which tells the dog *'that's the thing I want!'* at exactly the moment the dog displays the behaviour. Check you are clicking at the exact moment they do the behaviour rather than just before or after e.g. if teaching head rest, click while their chin is touching the flannel rather than when they have just lifted their chin off.

Don't panic if you click the wrong thing, just make sure you follow the click up with a treat regardless. The click is always a promise to the dog that a treat will follow, so as long as you have clicked it won't matter if it takes you a few seconds to get the treat out your treat bag. If you are still struggling to progress, check that your training sessions aren't going on for too long, the environment isn't too distracting or if your dog simply isn't motivated by the treats you are using. Also contact the **Family Dog team** for more detailed advice.