

By Charlotte Allmann

It's Magic!

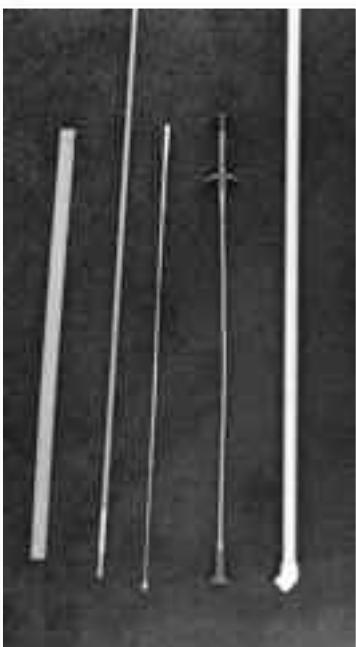
A Beginner's Guide to Clicker Training

“It’s magic.” I’ve heard that more than once when demonstrating clicker training to novice dog owners. As with the party magician, dog training “magic” is not supernatural — there is always a simple explanation. Plus, when we apply the clicker method to dog training, we are teaching ourselves as well. Our timing improves, understanding of behavior and observational skills get stronger, and we begin to understand a dog’s thinking process. We become more creative trainers. Clicker training is not only a training method, it’s a philosophy that can change us in a positive way.

Dogs, people and other living things learn in two ways, by classical conditioning (CC) and operant conditioning (OC). Classical conditioning is learning by association; operant conditioning is learning based on consequences. CC affects feelings, such as the excitement your dog feels when you pick up the leash. OC is a simpler: The dog learns that a specific behavior will be rewarded, thereby reinforcing the behavior. Rewarded behaviors will increase; ignored behavior will decrease.

It is the simpler operant conditioning that is the foundation of clicker training. Karen Pryor, author of *Don't Shoot The Dog*, writes that clicker training works by the dog associating its behavior with the distinct ‘click’ sound, which tells the animal when they’re doing the right thing. This click is combined with positive reinforcement for “an effective, safe, and humane way to teach any animal any behavior that it is physically and mentally capable of doing.”

Many dog trainers use the word “Yes!” to mark the desired behavior, or make a clicking sound with their tongue. This does work, but I feel first you should learn to use the clicker. Many trainers who use voice alone

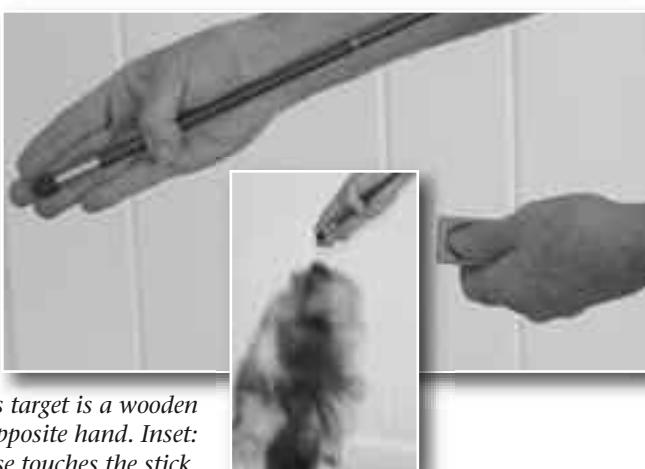


Examples of targets. From left: a stick, dowel, collapsible pointer, mechanics pick-up tool, plastic pipe with 45-degree “L” on end.

never develop a good sense of timing and have weak results. Some become frustrated without knowing why.

Using the clicker is a skill that we need to learn and practice. Start with a simple behavior such as a trick. After all, a fun trick isn’t going to cause any conflict with other behaviors such as those needed for the show, obedience or agility ring. And if we make a mistake, nothing is ruined — it’s only a trick. We can start over, give it a new cue or move on to something else.

A practical beginning. If you have never used a clicker or have and are ready to give up, keep in mind that you are teaching your dog that the click means a reward is coming. This is called ‘powering up’ the clicker, giving the sound meaning. The idea is to reward/reinforce at a very high rate in the beginning. Use your dog’s favorite treat: pieces of hot dogs, sausage, cheese, chicken, liver, something soft and smelly. Use small pieces — dogs don’t care how much they get, but they do care how many times they get it. Keep the treats in a pocket or bait pouch so you can give them quickly and easily.



Clicker continued from page 29 course, or the dog won't progress or try new behaviors, but always quit on a high note and keep the reinforcement at a very high level.

After two or three good performances or one spectacular one, end the session. Pump those treats to the dog as if he won the lottery. Enthusiasm is met with enthusiasm, and if you leave the dog wanting more, he will be anticipating the next lesson.

Glue to the target. Once you have the dog seeking out the end of the stick with his nose in many different places, start to move the stick with the dog following the end with his nose. Don't rush; work on one "D" at a time. After a series of refresher nose touches, delay the CT for one second while the nose stays on the stick. If the dog bounces off the stick, simply ignore it with no CT. Start with one second, then two, three, maybe four, then move the stick as if leading the dog by his nose. Move only the dog's head at first, then the feet. Increase the distance of movement in a straight line before CT. When the dog is moving in a straight line for several feet with his nose on the stick, curve the movement. Your goal will be to move the dog in any direction — a circle, in heel position, on the right side, wherever you hold the end of the stick. The nose does not need to be touching the stick, but the dog needs to follow it. The end of the stick has become a lure.

Now the trick! If you proceeded carefully and the dog is reliably following the end of the stick, begin to train the "Roll Over." If there is any weakness in the 'glue' holding the dog's nose to the stick, add a little peanut butter or soft cheese to the end of the stick, letting the dog lick the end whenever he is in position. Place the dog into the down position, facing you. Put the end of the stick in front of the dog, get the nose touch and move the end clockwise and very slightly upward in an arc toward the right hip. CT in successive approximations of a



Teaching the roll over using a target.

Learn more about clicker training.

Websites:

www.clickertraining.com; www.kathsdao.com;
www.clickandtreat.com;
www.clickerdogs.com; www.i2iK9.com.

YouTube:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhmONAl6Yiw

Books:

Don't Shoot the Dog by Karen Pryor;
The Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson; *Right on Target!* by Mandy Book and Cheryl Smith;
Click for Joy by Melissa Alexander.

tight arc as the feet begin to leave the floor, and finally, the dog follows the stick completely over to the other side. You may CT for every few inches towards the complete roll over. Build slowly, delaying the CT a little, until the dog rolls completely over before CT. If you proceed too quickly, the dog may get stuck or hop up on his feet before rolling over. Try again. On the other hand, some dogs "get it" almost immediately.

Voilà! A roll over! This often takes no more than a few minutes. Repeat with the target stick until you have a complete roll over without stopping to CT. Now you can add the verbal cue and a hand signal.

Be creative, have fun. Now you have a clicker-savvy dog, a smarter and more creative trainer, and the foundation for teaching your dog dozens of different behaviors for fun and for competition. Set some goals. What do you want to do with your dog? If it's obedience and rally, use the target stick and clicker to get quick, precise heeling, without lagging or forging. This hands-off method to teach heel position is efficient because the dog, not the leash, our hands or a cookie lure is responsible for the placement of his body. You can cue a spin in the ring when the judge says "exercise finished" — it is as good as liver to your dog. You can take many of these rewarding behaviors into the ring with you.

Here are some things to do with a target stick: Direct the dog to close a cupboard door, teach left and right spins, substitute a foot touch for the nose touch, teach "high five." How about teaching your dog to skateboard with the target?

Keep an open mind and think creatively; there is no end to behaviors your dog — and you — can learn. ■

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Keep the end of the stick close to your palm if the dog becomes frustrated.



CT only when the dog touches the end of the stick.

Begin by associating the click with a reward. As fast as you can, click the clicker and give the dog a treat after each click. Do this at least 30 times in quick succession, or until you see the dog is beginning to anticipate the treat at the sound of the click. Click high, low, behind your back, with one hand and then the other hand. Vary hand placement as much as your arm will allow. Do not reach for the treat until you have clicked so the dog will not follow your hand in anticipation.

When the dog is anticipating the reward after the click, choose a behavior that your dog already knows, such as sit. Tell the dog, "Sit," and as soon as he does, Click and Treat (CT).

The primary reinforcer is the treat, but now the dog knows the click means the treat is coming and he will perform for the click. This makes for a highly motivated dog. Forever remember that the click is a promise that a treat always follows. It is exciting to watch your dog catch on while you will be on your way to understanding a dog's behavior and thinking.

Technique and foundation. We will start with the foundation of a great many dog tricks: target training, or the nose-touch to a target. It is important to remember when starting clicker training to not speak a name for the behavior until the dog is offering it on his own. Eventually you will want a verbal cue or hand signal, but in the beginning it is confusing for the dog.

The target. Now select a target. You could use your

hand or a plastic lid, but I prefer a target stick or wooden spoon. The stick can be as simple as a wooden dowel with colored tape on one end. A variety of target sticks can be purchased on-line or at high-end pet stores. Some come with plastic balls on the end or even with a clicker attached. I prefer using the stick or wooden spoon instead of my hand because of the flexibility of directing the dog at a

distance, saving my back and knees at the same time. The longer-than-my-arm extension keeps my body out of the picture when cueing the dog. The target stick is mechanical and can be faded, whereas your hand is used for hand signals and its touch can be a reward in itself.

Have your clicker in one hand and the target stick in the other, exposing only a few inches of the end. Show it to the dog so it will spark his curiosity and he will sniff it. Even if the dog investigates your palm holding the stick, you will CT at the moment of the nose touch to stick. You can feed the dog with your other hand, or you can toss the treat onto the floor. By tossing the treat, you get the dog to move away from the stick, allowing the nose touch to begin again. Show the end of the stick again and CT. Repeat several times.

When the dog is seeking out the end of the stick, move it out further from your hand. You can begin with the dog touching any part of the stick, but soon raise your criteria and CT only when the dog touches the end of the stick. If the dog gets frustrated, go back to putting the stick closer to your palm. Gradually move the end of the stick farther out until the

dog is only CT'd for the nose touch to the end; ignore touches to other parts of the stick or your hand. Now move the end of the stick around: high, low, left hand, right hand, behind you, close to your body, out away from you, so the dog has to move around to touch the end with its nose.

When the dog appears to be catching on, raise your criteria

and lower your expectations. This is important: When you make something more difficult, go back a step or two in some other component. Add the "3 Ds of Difficulty" — duration, distance, distraction — while watching the dog for signs of stress. You will see a little frustration, of

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Practicing with the target. This dog is moving easily around its trainer to follow the target.

