

18 Behavior Modification

Clicker and Target Training



What is clicker training, and how does it work?

Clicker training is used as a means of clearly and immediately reinforcing a behavior in virtually any species of animal.

A clicker or an audible tone (found on some remote collars) is paired with a food reward until it becomes a conditioned stimulus for food. This is done by consistently sounding the clicker just prior to giving the food (click, then hand the pet a highly valued food treat); the “click” predicts that a food reward is forthcoming. The value of a clicker is that it can be used to immediately mark correct responses in a precise manner, with the food being given shortly afterwards.

“A clicker or an audible tone (found on some remote collars) is paired with a food reward until it becomes a conditioned stimulus for food.”



Once the clicker is predictive of a reward, it can be used as a bridging stimulus. This means that the clicker can be used immediately as a positive marker of the correct response, and the food reward can be slightly delayed until it is available. For example, suppose your dog eliminates outdoors while you are supervising it, or you observe your cat eliminating in its litter box. You can immediately click to mark the correct response, and then retrieve the reward such as a treat from the refrigerator. If you consistently use the clicker each time the pet repeats the behavior, your pet will associate the treat with the behavior.

The clicker can also be used for initial training of new responses, and for counter-conditioning. Clickers are an excellent way to gradually shape more elaborate or more accurate responses, since it is possible to reinforce one small increment of behavior and then with each subsequent session, reinforce responses that are gradually closer to the final goal. In addition to pairing clickers with food rewards, you can also pair the clicker with a specific word command such as yes, or with praise, stroking or petting.

How do I use the clicker to train my pet?

Remember that pets learn by consequences and associations, so that even with immediate timing, your pet will not understand that its behavior earned the reward after only one repetition. In other words, a single click followed by a food reward is not sufficient for a pet to understand what behavior earned the reward. You will need to focus on one specific behavior and use the clicker each time the pet repeats that behavior; with multiple repetitions, the behavior

should become learned. When your pet reaches this point, the clicker can be used to gradually shape behavior sequences (like learning to pick up, retrieve, and give you the newspaper), or teach behaviors that become gradually longer (in duration) and increasingly more relaxed. By watching your pet and clicking for relaxed postures, facial expressions and breathing, you can use a clicker to train your pet to settle and calm. Once a desired response is achieved, you can maintain the behavior by using intermittent reinforcement or less valuable rewards.



“Remember that pets learn by consequences and associations.”

At what point should I click without giving food?

The simple answer is never. You are using the clicker as a conditioned stimulus that is predictive of food. However, if you reach a point where you don't think that a behavior requires a food reward, you can switch to intermittent reinforcement or less valuable reinforcers. During clicker training (or any other form of training), it is beneficial to use a verbal cue along with the click, so that your pet will begin to associate the behavior with a specific word. When that is accomplished you can then request a behavior, and follow the appropriate response with verbal praise and/or a food reward. Once a behavior becomes well established over time, you should be able to eliminate clicking altogether.

What is target training, and how does it work?

One common question from pet owners is how to get a pet to perform the behavior that we want to train and reward. One reliable method of achieving this is target training. When a pet is trained to pay attention to a target, they will follow that target, allowing the handler to easily lure them into certain positions (e.g., sit) and to redirect their attention away from competing attractions. Using the closed fist as the target makes great sense, since it is always with us; it also is a natural place to hold a treat. To train a pet to a target fist, simply put the tiny tasty treat in your hand and close the hand into a fist. Allow the pet to smell the closed fist, then release the treat. Usually after 2 to 3 repetitions, the pet readily focuses on your closed fist in anticipation of a tasty morsel. Then move your fist in different directions – where the closed fist goes, your pet's head follows and then its body follows.

“Using the closed fist as the target makes great sense because it is always with us; it is also a natural place to hold a treat.”

If the target fist starts in front of the pet's nose and moves up and back over the head in a gentle arc, the pet will sit; if the target fist is brought up towards the forehead the pet will make eye contact, etc. As the pet successfully completes these tasks it is rewarded by release of the treat from the target fist. Once the pet has established great compliance with following the target fist, give the food rewards intermittently.

Another form of target training is to teach the dog or cat that a delectable treat will be given each time the pet touches a target object such as a stick, wand, sticky note or the palm of your hand. To teach this type of target training, immediately give a favored reward if the pet investigates the object. If necessary, you can gently touch it to the pet's nose and immediately give a favored reward. A dog is more likely to approach and touch the target if you place a small amount of cheese spread, liver spreader peanut butter on it, as long as there are no family allergies to peanut butter. A cat may be more likely to approach and touch a target if you place some liver or fish spread on it. Begin in the absence of distractions and each time the pet approaches and touches the target give the reward. Soon you should be able to move the target around or further away, with the pet approaching and getting reinforced each time it is presented. This type of target can then be used to help ensure consistent recalls, or to lure the pet into performing an action, such as getting into its crate, coming forward or backing up (see (21) Reinforcement and Rewards).

MannersMinder® – The MannersMinder is a training device that uses a form of clicker training to immediately reward the pet at the site of the training device (see (11) Behavior Management Products). It can be particularly useful for training pets to settle in a particular location. The MannersMinder is filled with dry food or treats, and food is released by a remote control device operated by the pet owner. Activating the remote control emits a tone from the MannersMinder, which is immediately followed by release of food from the device. It can be used to teach the pet through reward-based techniques to (1) train the pet to go on command to the location where the MannersMinder is set up (2) and to gradually shape longer and more settled down behaviors (e.g., on a mat). The MannersMinder can then serve as an effective aid in response substitution and counter-conditioning, where the dog is trained to settle on its mat or bed in front of the device as an alternative to barking at doors or windows, when people arrive at the home (greeting behaviors) or to condition positive associations to visitors, a cat in the home, or even during desensitization and counter-conditioning to sounds.