

Clicker Training Class:

You can teach a dog to do nearly anything it is physically able to do by using clicker training. This photo shows Coyote fundraising. He takes a dollar bill from a person, walks to his bucket and puts it into the bucket! He will do this all day long, with enthusiasm, because it was clicker trained and gets rewarded.



Bear the Beagle is also a pro at taking donations and putting them into a bucket.

Two clickers (showing top and bottom) and a wrist ring. Various styles of clicker are available or you could use a whistle or even the click of a retractable pen if your dog prefers a quieter sound.



What the heck is Clicker Training?

It used to be that to train a dog, you were taught to push, pull, and jerk on them. To get them to sit, you pushed their bottom down, to get them to come, you pulled them to you with the lead and to get them to heel, you jerked the leash whenever they were not in the right position. I admit, I used to train this way, but it wasn't very fun and I'm sure my dog wasn't enjoying it (his growling at me was not my first clue.) I have since learned a much better way to train. Its brain based instead of pain based. It's fun, it works really well and it works faster than the old methods. Dogs also retain what they learn much longer because the dog is truly learning the behavior (using their brain.) The dogs enjoy it, because it's not 'work,' it's a game and success brings good things to the dog.



It's called POSITIVE MOTIVATIONAL TRAINING (also known as 'clicker training' or Operant Conditioning.) If you have never trained a dog before, this will be easy for you to do. If you have used 'traditional' training methods, forget everything you learned and open your mind to a better way. I challenge you to try 'clicker training' for a month. Really give it a true try and decide for yourself if it's better. If there is a particular aspect of this type of training that is giving you trouble, have someone who is knowledgeable about positive training methods help you. Feel free to talk to Chris about any problems you may be encountering. Each dog is an individual and there are many different approaches that can be used while still being positive and fun for you and the dog.

How it works: The number one thing for you to remember about training dogs is-- DOG'S DO WHAT WORKS FOR THEM. By 'works' I mean, gets them what they want. When they figure out that they need to sit and wait patiently for the door to open, before they are allowed to go outside and chase squirrels, they are very likely to sit and wait (provided that dashing through a door as it's being opened doesn't get them the same thing.)

It's all about controlling their environment. You have tremendous control over your dog's environment; you just aren't making use of it. You can control when they eat, what they eat, where they sleep, when they go outside, what small part of the universe they get to explore, even if they live or die! If your dog wants it, it can be used as a reward.



All things that dogs want are somewhere on an imaginary "reward scale". Table scraps are usually above kibble on the scale. Chasing moving objects is high on the scale for many dogs and baths are usually low. Things can change their position based on the environment. If your dog has just eaten a large meal, treats aren't going to motivate him as much as they do when he's hungry. Regardless of whether or not you are using these things consciously or not, they are rewarding the dog for SOMETHING each time the dog gets what he wants. If he scratches at the back door and you open it, he just learned that scratching the door works and he'll do it again in the future. If barking while he's outside makes you pay attention to him (even if it's negative attention in the form of you yelling), he will continue to bark because he craves attention.

Anytime you notice something your dog wants, make him do what YOU want first. If he wants a scrap off your plate, he has to sit first. No sit = no scrap. If he wants attention, he has to sit first (not jump on you). No sit = no attention, turn away and ignore him. As soon as he's sitting, praise and pet him. Withholding the reward for not doing what you ask is very important. If he can get the treat for not sitting, why should he sit? The more often he gets rewarded for ignoring you, the more likely this behavior (ignoring) will be repeated in the future - because it works for the dog! If you don't have time to wait for the dog to comply, or you aren't willing to withhold the reward for non-compliance, don't ask anything of the dog. An example of this would be requiring that the dog sit before you let him out the door. If you are in a hurry to leave, and your dog doesn't do the sit reliably already, don't ask him to sit this time, because you won't be able to take the few minutes of waiting that may be required for the dog to figure out that "sit opens the door."

Unless you are starting with an 8-week-old pup, there is a good chance that your dog has already learned several things that have 'worked' for him. For example, he's probably learned that jumping up on you gets him attention (at least sometimes and even if it's 'negative' in the form of you pushing him off.) Staring at you or pawing at you while you eat sometimes gets him a tasty morsel, scratching or barking at the door makes you open it, and bringing you a toy usually causes you to play with him. So far, he has you pretty well trained! So now, we need to turn the tables a bit.



What's a clicker? A clicker is a small device used to send an audible signal to the dog that says "that was correct and you will be getting a reward." So, you might ask, why not just give the dog the reward only. Because timing is critical. There are also numerous situations where it's not possible to give the dog the reward at the exact instant that he's doing what you want (like when you progress to the point of the dog working a few feet away from you, or as he's going over a jump.) The clicker allows you to 'speak' to the dog in a language that is crystal clear. Dog's don't understand spoken words when they first hear them,

but they do learn which words mean good things are about to happen (walk, ride, cookie, outside, dinner, etc.)

The clicker is going to become the same kind of "predictor of good things" for the dog. It always sounds the same, regardless of your mood and it's distinctive and unique. It's not likely that you will use the clicker in everyday conversation with your family. This unique sound is processed by the primitive part of the brain. The "reacting" part that also processes extreme pleasure and extreme fear without conscious thought. It is not processed by the "thinking" part of the brain, so that part can go on thinking about the task at hand without interruption. Because dogs don't primarily use a spoken language for communication, when a word is used, it can interrupt their thinking for a brief moment as their brain processes whether the word they just heard means anything to the dog. For this reason, the click sound or a whistle is the best way to "mark" the exact moment when the dog was doing what you want. This allows your communication to be very precise and makes the communication very easy for the dog to understand.

Where do you get a clicker? Any training center that uses positive 'clicker' methods will sell them, some pet supply stores are now stocking them and they are available on-line from Dog Scouts of America. Most dog supply catalogs have them too. They are usually only a few dollars or less. Most are a small plastic box with an opening that exposes a flat piece of metal. When pressed, one end of the metal makes a 'click-click' sound, the other end of the metal is attached to the box, so it doesn't 'click'. There are also other varieties of clickers. Some are a bit more quiet and have a raised button such as the "I-click" and some are actually kids toys shaped like little bugs or animals. These are good for sound sensitive dogs who may find that the loudness of the regular clicker is hard on their ears. If your dog seems to shy away when you use a regular clicker, they may have sensitive hearing. Try an "I-click" clicker, or use a retractable ink pen to create a quiet click. ClickerTraining.com sells "clickers" that give 4 different sounds as well as the traditional clickers and the "i-Click" design that you can step on with your foot to keep your hands free.

How to get started: First, you have to make the click mean something. You want it to be a signal that the dog is going to get a great reward. Always use something your dog REALLY likes as a reward. Don't use so-so treats like kibble because the dog won't be as motivated as if you used cooked chicken bits. Dogs will work the same for itty-bitty pea sized pieces of treats as they do for big pieces. Also, lots of little pieces given one at a time are more rewarding than one big piece or several pieces given all at once. This type of training is fastest with the use of lots of treats and you don't want your dog to get overweight, so keep the pieces very very tiny. They really will work for crumbs, even the big dogs. Carrots work for some dogs and won't put weight on them. Don't use raisins or grapes though, they are toxic to dogs (so is chocolate, onions and macadamia nuts.) The reward does not HAVE to be food though. It can be anything the dog wants. This can be forward movement while on a walk, having the door opened, getting the dinner bowl filled, going for a ride, having a toy thrown, playing tug, getting a friendly scratch on the neck, etc.

If you want to use food as the reward, then you have to make food special. If the dog can get food from a bowl anytime he pleases, then having you offer food isn't as motivating. Using feeding times such as a morning meal and an evening meal will make the food (and feeding time) more special. This has also helped dogs become less "finicky" and once they learn that the food is only presented twice a day and gets picked up after 30 minutes, they learn to eat with more speed and motivation. Now, "between meal treats" are special and more rewarding.

To get the clicker to mean good things, you will first 'click', then give your dog a treat. This sounds simple enough, but there are a few more 'rules' to make your dog learn this concept much faster. First, don't keep the treats visible. If the dog sees the treats in your hand, THAT is what becomes the predictor of good things (not the click) so invest in a treat bag or put the treats in your pocket or keep them behind your back or on a nearby table. At first, keeping them in your hand behind

your back or on a near-by countertop may be best. The faster you can deliver the treat after you click, the faster the dog will learn what the click means. Just be sure the dog can't see the hand with the treats. The dog will know you have treats, this is fine. What he has to realize is, that even though you have treats on you, he doesn't get one till you click. It won't take many repetitions of this before the dog is giving you his full attention hoping you will click (and give him a treat.)

Rule number two: Click ALWAYS means treat! If you only sometimes give a treat when you click, the click loses its effectiveness. Just as if you told your dog "dinner time" then didn't feed him, at first he would still get excited, but if it happened often enough, "dinner time" would start to lose its meaning. You want to keep the meaning of the click very clear, so always treat - even if you accidentally clicked at the wrong time (this will have more meaning in a moment.)

When you have clicked and given a treat several times, test to see if your dog really knows what the click means. To do this, wait till the dog is distracted (not paying attention to you) and click. If the dog practically gives himself whiplash to turn and look to you for a treat, then he understands it and you can move on to the next step. If he ignored the click, the click doesn't mean anything yet and you need to do more repetitions of click-then treat.



He controls the click. The next step in starting your dog on clicker training is to get him to understand that it's his behavior that causes you to click and give him what he wants. Start with a simple behavior such as "touch."

The behavior you want: The dog touches your hand with his nose when you offer the palm of your hand and say "touch."

To get this behavior, you'll start by making it simple. Before you offer your hand, be ready to click. Put your hand a few inches from the dog's nose and as soon as he moves to sniff your hand, click and reward. DO NOT use the verbal cue of "touch" yet. That will come later once the dog knows the desired behavior and you want to name the behavior. Just stay quiet and let the dog learn.



Repeat the hand offering just a short distance from the dog. He should not have to take a step to touch your hand, but can stretch his neck just a bit. Each time the dog touches your hand, click upon contact and then reward the dog.

If the dog loses interest in your hand, you can encourage the touch by hiding a tiny bit of treat between your fingers or rubbing your hand on a scent the dog likes such as a cat or other animal. If the dog does not try to touch your hand as soon as it is offered, remove your hand, don't reward the dog, stay silent and then offer your hand again.

He's got it! Once your dog is actively moving to touch your hand as soon as it's been presented (because he has learned that behavior brings him a reward) then you can start to match the verbal cue to the behavior. Be sure the dog is touching your hand and that you aren't "helping" by moving your hand into his nose. Your hand is presented and then stays still while the dog moves his nose to your hand.

Pick a cue: before you offer your hand, decide what you want the cue to be. I'll use "touch" for this example. You can use "touch," "bump," "push" or whatever. Just pick a word and only use the chosen word as the cue.

Naming the behavior: When the dog is doing the desired behavior reliably and predictably, then you can add the verbal cue. Regardless of what you are teaching the dog, **the NEW cue always comes just before the dog does the behavior and just before any other cue is given.** This is important for helping the dog understand that the verbal cue means something and is important. In the case of the "touch" behavior, the current cue is the presentation of the hand. right now, the dog knows that when the hand is presented, it should touch it to get a click and reward. So the NEW cue "touch" needs to be given before the hand is presented. Say "touch", offer your hand, click when the dog makes contact and then reward.

Understanding the cue: When the dog hears the cue "touch", he will start to anticipate that you are going to offer your hand. To see if your dog understands that the cue means something, wait till the dog is distracted (not paying attention to you.) Say "touch" and see if the dog looks at your hand. If he does, you are ready to move on to increase the difficulty.

Making it harder for the dog: Now you need to help the dog "generalize" the meaning of the cue. This means the dog understands that "touch" means touch your hand regardless of where your hand is located and what is going on around the dog. Each time you change the position of your hand, stay quiet for the first few repetitions. This is so you can be sure the dog still understands what is needed to make you click. You don't want to be saying "touch" and having the dog not do the behavior. The cue will not be as clear to the dog if it sometimes means his nose contacts your hand and sometimes means that he doesn't touch your hand. Once the dog is reliably doing the touch in the new position, you can add the cue again just before your hand is offered.

Start by offering your hand a little farther from the dog so that a small step is needed for the dog to reach your hand. Repeat this a few times and then add the cue for a few repetitions.

Next, offer your hand a bit farther away, requiring a bigger step to reach your hand. Repeat this a few times before adding the cue. Each time the dog makes contact, he gets clicked. If he doesn't try to touch your hand as soon as it's presented, remove your hand for a few seconds during which the dog doesn't get a reward.

Now offer your hand above the level of the dog's head. This means he has to raise his nose to touch your hand.

Now move your hand slightly away from the dog as he tries to touch it. This will start the process of teaching the dog to follow your hand with his nose. Only move it an inch or two away at first until the dog is reliably moving after your hand and making contact.

Now move it a bit farther as the dog follows it with his nose. Again, have a few repetitions without the cue to be sure the dog will still do the behavior before you add the cue again.

New behaviors built on "touch": Next move your hand in an arch as the dog follows it, the start of a "spin" behavior.

After a few repetitions of getting the dog to curve while following your hand, you can get the dog to do more of a turn. Work slowly toward getting your dog to make a full circle while following your hand. Now you have a new trick!

You can use "touch" to get the dog into "heel" position and have the dog follow your hand while he stays in heel for a step, then two steps, then three. Eventually your dog will have a nice "heel" simply by following your hand.

You can use the "touch" to move the dog onto the scale at the vet, to get him to "stand" from a sit, and to do a nice "front" after a recall. All from a simple "touch" cue!

"My dog's isn't getting it" If your dog seems to lose focus or doesn't seem to understand what you want, you have either progressed to a higher level too fast, you are not rewarding often enough during the learning stage, or your training session is too long. You might also be in competition with things that are more exciting going on around your dog. Your dog will learn faster if he can concentrate on what you are doing, instead of wanting to watch the squirrels or other dogs or kids, etc. Once the dog understands the behavior, then you can add in those distractions. But when you learn something new, odds are it is easier if there are no other distractions. Same for your dog.

Things to try to help increase your dog's success: A quieter environment, more motivating rewards, more excitement from you when he gets it right, easier tasks so rewards can come faster (20 rewards in 60 seconds is doing good.) Also be sure you are clicking at the same time the dog is doing exactly what you want.

"It's too confusing". If you are having any trouble with understanding this method of training, please talk to Chris, the troop leader. Once you see it "in action" and get some help with timing (the most common beginner's error), you will see that this is a very easy method to use and the dogs learn faster and retain knowledge MUCH longer. You only need the clicker in your hand to teach new behaviors.

"I don't have enough hands!"- Trying to hold the leash, clicker and treats can be hard. If you are staying in one place while training, step on the dog's leash (or don't use one if it's not needed.) If you are moving while training (such as with the heel), get a leash short enough so that you can clip it to your waist and it won't get tangled in the dog's legs. Or use a long enough leash to wrap it around your waist as show to the right. Treats should be kept in a pocket or pouch or on a surface nearby. Only reach for the treat after you have clicked. Don't leave your hand in the treat pouch/pocket.



Main Points to remember:

Dogs do what works for them (and quit doing what doesn't work.) A click is always followed by a treat. The dog's behavior controls when you click. What happens AFTER your dog does something is what determines if that behavior will be repeated or not. Cues do not cause behavior, a long reward history does (lots of correct repetitions with rewards.) Cues simply let the dog know which behavior is likely to be rewarded.

Don't name it till you have it: Another difference between this training method and 'traditional' methods is when you name a behavior. In traditional methods, you usually started saying the command as you put the dog into position. Granted, this did eventually work, but it's a slow process for the dog and mentally taxing. In positive training, we get the behavior first, then pair it with a cue. This is a hard concept for people to grasp because we are a language-based species. But dogs have a limited vocal language and they don't readily understand our spoken language. If we are able to get the dog to offer a particular behavior several times and build a strong reward history for performing that behavior, when we add the verbal cue, both the behavior and the cue will be learned much faster!



An example: If you are trying to teach your dog to go through an agility tunnel, but the dog is fearful of the tunnel, you would not want to keep

saying "tunnel" as you try to get the dog to go through it. There are a few reasons that giving a verbal cue first in this situation is worse than waiting.

A) The dog doesn't yet know what 'tunnel' means.

B) Your repeating the word tunnel forces his brain to process the word (to see if he knows it) each time you say it. Granted, this only takes a fraction of a second, but it interrupts his thinking process.

C) If the dog is hesitant or fearful of what you are trying to teach, the dog is going to associate those feelings with the word.

So let's try a different approach. Stay quiet and let the dog explore the tunnel on his own. Click/treat if he sniffs it, Click/treat if he puts his head in it, Click/treat if he puts a foot in it. You are forming a positive association to the tunnel and letting the dog find out on his own that it's not scary - quite the opposite, it brings treats! The dog will be more confident about going into it if you let him explore it at a pace he is comfortable with. It will only take one short session for a dog that really understands the clicker, to be confidently going through the tunnel. You can also help by pushing it into a short ring by bunching it up. Now it's not a scary hole, but a ring the dog can see through. Gradually extend the tunnel as the dog masters going through first the hoop, then a really short tunnel, then a bit longer tunnel. Once the dog is racing through the fully extended tunnel to get the reward, NOW, you can add a verbal cue.

Anytime you add or change a cue, you add the new cue a second or two prior to the old cue. For Example: In the case above, the presence of the tunnel was the original cue. To add a verbal cue, you would say 'tunnel' as you walk toward the tunnel. This way, the dog will quickly learn to ANTICIPATE going through the tunnel when he hears the word tunnel. He no longer needs to 'think' about how to go through the tunnel, so he can concentrate fully on learning the meaning of the verbal cue. The verbal cue is no longer an interruption of his thinking process and he will associate the word with a fun activity (rather than a scary one.)

Be patient and let the dog think! Don't chatter to the dog or do the thinking for him by using body or verbal cues. Wait till the dog has learned the behavior BEFORE you name it

If you have any trouble, contact Chris or a local 'clicker trainer'.



Bear LOVES the chute!

This "collapsed" fabric tunnel can be very scary for dogs if not trained slowly and with positive associations.