

Clicker Training

By Sherry Woodard, Best Friends animal behavior consultant



What is clicker training?

Clicker training is a fun and effective way to communicate with your pets. You can train almost any kind of pet — including cats, birds, dogs, rabbits, rats, and horses — to respond to the clicker. For example, you can teach your dog to sit or your bird to hop onto a stick using clicker training. The only thing you need is a clicker, some treats, and an animal friend.

Clicker training is gentler than traditional training methods. According to Karen Pryor's clickertraining.com website, "In traditional training, you tell an animal or person what to do, make that behavior happen (using force if necessary), reward good results, and punish mistakes. In clicker training you watch for the behavior you like, mark the instant

it happens with a click, and pay off with a treat. The treat may be food, a pat, praise, or anything else the learner enjoys. If the learner makes a mistake all you do is wait and let them try again.”

How did clicker training get started?

Clicker training uses a method called operant conditioning, pioneered by psychologist B.F. Skinner in the 1960s. Skinner observed that an animal will tend to repeat an action that has a positive consequence and will avoid an action that has a negative consequence. If a primary reinforcer (like food) is used, the animal will become conditioned to repeat the action that produces the food. Using operant conditioning, Skinner trained rats to push a lever that released food pellets.

The clicker is used as a conditioned reinforcer, a cue that something good is coming. A form of clicker training (using whistles) was originally used with great success on dolphins. In the 1990s, clicker training for other animals really took off when trainers realized how easy and effective it was.

How does clicker training work?

Clicker training works by getting your pet to expect something enjoyable (like a treat) in return for doing something you ask him or her to do. You use the clicker so that your pet will associate the treat with the clicking noise.

How do I do clicker training?

1. Choose the best clicker. There are several types, and you will want one that elicits a sound that does not startle your pet. Cats, for example, are sometimes frightened by a loud click. Some pets may even require a very soft clicking sound, such as that made with a ballpoint pen.

2. Charge the clicker. Next, you'll need to "charge" the clicker — that is, give the clicker a particular meaning so that your pet associates something good with it. Think of it like this: The first time you use an electric can opener to open a can of cat food, that sound means nothing to your cat. But after you've made that sound a few times, and a bowl of food promptly appears, your cat expects food when he hears the can opener. That's the type of association you want your pet to have when he hears the clicker.

To start, make sure you have your clicker and some soft treats on hand, cut or broken up into small pieces. Next, position yourself near your pet, someplace quiet where there aren't any distractions. Push and release the clicker, then immediately give your pet a treat. Repeat this numerous times. You want your pet to expect a treat every time she hears the clicking noise.

3. Use the clicker to reward behavior. Next, when your pet does anything that you'd like her to repeat, you can "capture" that behavior by click-and-reward. You're sending the message "What you just did is good," and your pet will want to do that behavior again. It usually only takes a few repetitions for a pet to learn that a particular behavior elicits the click, followed by the reward.

For a behavior that you would like your pet to do, you can do a click-and-reward when there's even small movements in the right direction. For example, if you are working on teaching her the "come" cue and she takes two steps in the right direction, click the clicker and offer a treat. After she learns that this small step elicits a reward, withhold the click until she moves a bit closer to you. Repeat this exercise until she eventually comes all the way to you. This process is called "shaping."

What if my pet doesn't do what I asked?

First, don't ever push, pull or force her to do what you want. If your pet doesn't do what you've asked (like sit or come), don't click or offer a treat. You can try to help her get the idea by holding the treat above her nose (to get her to sit) or by walking away from her and holding the treat out in front of you (to get her to come). This strategy is called "luring."

What other kinds of things can I teach my pet to do?

Once your pet has learned one behavior and does it every time, you can start adding others. Don't try to teach her more than one at a time. Here are some examples of other behaviors to click and give treats for:

- Holding up one paw (high five!)
- Sitting up on her hind legs
- Turning in a circle
- Stepping up onto or down from different surfaces

Remember:

- Click while or immediately after the behavior happens.
- Always click first, then offer a treat.
- Only click once.

One last thing: Keep the practice sessions short. You want your pet to enjoy clicker training, so don't make it into a chore. Have fun clicker training your pet!

Where can I find out more about clicker training?

Here are two websites to check out:

clickertrain.com

clickertraining.com