



## ***What is Clicker Training?***

"Clicker training" is a slang term used to describe a way of training animals that has become increasingly popular in the last decade because of its gentle methods. The scientific term for it is **operant conditioning**.

## ***What is Operant Conditioning?***

**Operant conditioning** is the way any animal (including the human kind) interacts with and learns from its environment. Simply put, an animal tends to repeat an action that has a positive consequence and tends not to repeat one that has a negative consequence. Trainers can take advantage of that natural tendency by providing positive reinforcement following an action that they want the animal to repeat. In order for the animal to connect the positive reinforcement to the behavior that he is doing, the reinforcement must happen **AS** the behavior is occurring, not afterwards. The actual reinforcement can't always be gotten to the animal at that precise instant, however. Trainers needed to find another way of letting the animal know that he was doing the right thing, so they began using a conditioned reinforcer. A conditioned reinforcer is anything that wouldn't ordinarily be something the animal would work to get. A primary reinforcer, on the other hand, is something that the animal automatically finds reinforcing, such as food or water. When a conditioned reinforcer is paired with a primary reinforcer, they become of equal importance to the animal. Enter the clicker as a conditioned reinforcer.

***The Clicker*** is a tool that makes a sharp, clicking sound when pushed and released. Its value is that the unique sound doesn't get lost in the babble of words we are constantly throwing at our dogs. It is faster than saying "***Good dog!***" and allows the trainer to mark with great precision the behavior for which the dog is being reinforced. Paired with something the animal finds very reinforcing, the clicker becomes a powerful tool for shaping behavior.

**W**hen you shape behavior, you reinforce closer and closer approximations of the actual behavior you are looking for. For instance, if you are trying to teach your dog to "shake hands" you would click and treat at first if he simply raised his paw just a bit off the ground. As you progressed, you would stop reinforcing a slight raise of the paw. You would now require that the paw is raised higher, and then the paw would have to come towards you, etc. Breaking the behavior down into **TINY** steps allows progress to be made quickly.

## ***Getting Started:***

**Y**our first step in using this type of training is to "*pair*" the click sound with a treat that the animal really likes. Click and treat a number of times until the dog begins to look for the treat when he hears the click. You are now ready to begin using the clicker to communicate with your dog.

**I**n order to reinforce the desired behavior, you must first get the behavior. Some behaviors occur naturally, such as sitting, lying down or barking. Not only do these behaviors occur naturally, but they are apt to occur at predictable times as well. You can place the animal in the situation where the behavior is most likely to happen and then wait patiently.

**A**n alternative for those who have no patience, and for those behaviors, such as shaking hands, playing dead or begging that do not occur naturally, there is another method. These behaviors can be elicited. An easy way of eliciting a behavior is to lure it with food. Teaching the "sit" is an easy way to demonstrate this method.

**T**ouch a treat to the dog's nose and then lift it up slightly and move it toward the dog's forehead. If you don't lift the treat too high, the dog will follow the treat with his nose and his rear end will just naturally hit the ground. You "click" as his rear end hits the ground (timing the click is critical!) and give him the treat. You have "lured" him into a sit. Repeat this several times and then simply "tease" him by touching a treat to his nosing briefly and then removing it. Chances are he will offer the sit to you. Once you have him offering you the sit, you can begin attaching the cue to the behavior.

**C**ues are attached to a behavior only after you have the dog offering the behavior. This is because you can only teach one thing at a time, and since a cue without a behavior is useless, you might as well teach the behavior first. Remember that your dog does not understand English ( regardless of what they say about Lassie ). A word only becomes meaningful when it has been paired with an action over many repetitions. So first get the dog to offer you the behavior on a regular basis; then put a name to it; fade the reinforcement as he becomes proficient....and then start teaching another behavior!!!