

Intro To Clicker/Bridge Training

"Training is a mechanical skill"
Bob Bailey



www.hssv.org

- T** = treat some type of small yummy, easily swallowed food item that the subject likes at that particular moment
- R** = reward or reinforcer - Anything the animal perceives as rewarding at that particular moment: food and the opportunity to play are typical rewards for a pet.
- VB** = verbal bridge (human vocal sound such as YES, BING, DING, RIGHT)
- C/R** = click immediately followed by a reward
- VB/R** = verbal bridge immediately followed by a reward

A clicker is a small handheld noisemaker that makes a distinct "click" when it is pressed. Clicker training is a subset or restricted application of OPERANT CONDITIONING.

We shall teach your pet that the sound of the clicker means that what he just did was correct and a reward (usually in the form of a yummy food treat) is now coming. Think of the click like a camera. It takes a snapshot of your animal at a particular moment. This gives your pet exact information on what behaviors are "correct".

The click sound is also known as a bridge. It "bridges" the time from when your pet does a correct behavior until the moment you can deliver the reward. The DELIVERY of the reward can be as important as the click itself when teaching new behaviors. This type of training encourages your animal to think while learning and it eliminates the need for physical corrections (such as hitting, jerking the leash or shouting at the pet).

A "click" can be any distinct noise (click of a pen, bottle cap, whistle, etc.). The human voice can also be used, picking a single distinct sounding word (such as YES, RIGHT, BING, DING, etc.) The problem with using the voice to shape new behaviors is it is often different sounding depending on your moods, volume, and if you have a cold! HOWEVER, teaching a bridge using the human voice is extremely advantageous to weaning off the clicker once behaviors are at a "finished state" and maintaining behaviors. It is HIGHLY recommend that you also teach a verbal bridge in addition to a clicker. The same training/learning principles apply to a verbal bridge as a "click" so just insert the word verbal bridge (VB) anywhere you see "click".

Clicker training can be used to teach simple behaviors such as sit, down, stay or more complicated behaviors such as tricks or precision work for competition obedience or agility. It can also be used on many behavior problems such as aggression and fear. Since clicker training is a no force, no pain method, it is ideal to use with nervous or fearful pets as well as aggressive animals. Children and elderly people can use clicker training as it does not involve physically pushing or pulling the animal.

Clicker training is ideal for shaping behavior. Shaping means breaking behavior down into a series of small steps that will eventually lead to a final picture for the animal. Each step is rewarded with clicks (and then followed by your treat) as you build towards your end goal.

BASIC RULES:

One click = reward/reinforcer

Click and then always reward your animal as quickly as possible. Make sure you are always clicking first, THEN reaching for a treat or tossing a favorite toy to your pet. Have someone watch you train to make sure you are clicking BEFORE you attempt to move your hand or body to reward your pet.

Always follow the click with a treat or some other type of reward that your particular pet considers valuable at that time. Over a short amount of time, the click will soon lose its significance if you are clicking and then not giving some valuable reward.

Always deliver the reward in such a way that helps you with the behavior you are training. For instance, if your pet tends to jump up after you click for a sit, make sure you are always delivering the treat to the pet's mouth in such a way so that he REMAINS sitting while you feed him.

One click can also mean a jackpot. If your pet does something outstanding for him, don't click many times. Instead give more treats or multiple rewards after the single click. This is called a jackpot. Jackpots can speed the learning process and keep the pet's interest in the game. A ratio of about 10 to 20 regular clicks per one jackpot is about right. Jackpots can be combined with other types of rewards such as a handful of food, enthusiastic praise, petting, a game of chase the human and tossing a toy out to play with.

Always try to click DURING the behavior. Timing is most critical when using any training method and clicker training really drives this lesson home. If you are late in clicking, your pet will not learn quickly and may actually learn the wrong behavior!

Do not say anything while your pet is learning. Don't try to urge him on with anything verbal such as "You almost got it!" or "SOOO close!". This just confuses your pet. Let the click guide your animal (like the HOT and COLD game we played as kids). It is the pet's responsibility to figure out what you are clicking for and it is YOUR responsibility to time your click appropriately. Once your pet gets a click and treat and then you can then add your verbal praise such as "good pet!"

Do not use any verbal or physical corrections when you are using a clicker. The clicker training sessions should create a safe environment for your pet to experiment with different behaviors. If your pet does the incorrect behavior, you simply do not click NOR say anything negative. The absence of the click gives a clicker-savvy pet as much information as a click itself!

Add a verbal cue only after the behavior is learned. Once the behavior is predictable (you can bet it will happen within a short time period like two to three seconds), and it "looks" the way you want it to, then start to add a verbal cue. Just BEFORE the animal repeats the behavior, say your chosen cue word (or command), when the animal does the behavior, click and treat (C&T). It takes about 50-60 repetitions to attach a cue word to a behavior so be patient!

Click for small steps towards your final goal. Raise your standards (criteria) slightly each two to three clicks until you have reached your final goal. It is helpful if you break down the final behavior into small steps before you start to train. Write it down on paper first so you know when to C&T.

Train for short time periods. Take 2 to 5 minutes per session to work your pet but try to do at least three sessions per day. Quit before your pet is tired or uninterested. If that means you only work two minutes with your pet on one particular day then that is fine.

Vary your treats and rewards. Instead of always giving hot dogs or Pup-a-roni, prepare a container that is a mixture of things. My dogs love Pepperidge Farms Gold Fish crackers, little bits of hot dogs, cheese, lunchmeat, and roast beef, even cat food. After a click, let them tug on their favorite toy or chase a ball a short distance instead of the food. For cats, instead of always using cat treats, try a small piece of chicken, tuna fish, cheese or lunchmeat.

Higher distracting environments require a higher value treat. When working out in your front yard or at the park or in any distracting environment, use high value treats to motivate your pet to work with you. I carry things such as roast beef, hamburger, garlic chicken, cheese, hot dogs, Vienna sausages or even fish. Find what really turns your dog's salivary glands on and then save those things for highly distracting environments. If your dog just doesn't seem to be very food motivated try NOT feeding your dog his regular meals for 12 to 24 hours (an adult dog can safely go without eating for 48 hours) before you start training.

When starting new behaviors start in the least distracting environment. Start somewhere quiet in the house with NO other activities going on at first. If you have multiple pets, put the other animals behind closed doors with a nice stuffed KONG to keep them occupied. Think of your pet like someone studying for college exams, one cannot concentrate when there is too much going on! Once he starts to understand the new behavior you are shaping, practice in a different room in the house. Practices in every room indoors until your pet performs reliably then go to the LEAST stimulating outside environment, such as the backyard (if that is now a BORING environment to your pet). From there, gradually graduate to more and more stimulating environments.

Charging Your Clicker or Verbal Bridge Charge your clicker or VB in small short sessions. Try to do at least two per day. You will know your pet has made the connection of sound equals reward when he visibly startles when the sound is made. Take 20-30 very small, thin, dime sized pieces of your pet's favorite food. Use roast beef, smoked chicken, hot dogs or anything else your pet would do back flips for. Click or VB at RANDOM intervals and then hand your pet the treat. Once the treats are gone, your training session is over for now. REMEMBER to CLICK or VB FIRST then give your pet the reward. Vary this by occasionally tossing the food on the floor next to you. DO NOT POINT THE CLICKER LIKE A REMOTE CONTROL AT YOUR PET NOR MAKE ANY HAND MOVEMENTS UNTIL AFTER YOU HAVE CLICKED OR VB. Put the clicker behind your back if you have a habit of moving it around as you work. You want your pet to focus on the sound, not you moving the clicker around or reaching for a treat before you have sounded the click.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- **Clicker Training for Dogs** by Karen Pryor
- **Clicker Training for Cats** by Karen Pryor
- **Quick Clicks** by Mandy Book and Cheryl Smith
- **The Power of Positive Training** by Pat Miller
- **"Crossover" Clicker Training Workbook** by Gail Fisher
- **Click for Joy: The Clicker Training Answer Book** by Melissa Alexander

Web Sites:

- Karen Pryor's <http://www.clickertraining.com/> & www.dontshootthedog.com & www.click-l.com
- www.clickersolutions.com
- www.wagntrain.com

"Training is easy, but it is not simple." Bob Bailey

Don't be discouraged if your pet doesn't "get it", training any species of animal is not simple. If you are frustrated or confused, do get yourself into a good local clicker training course.

FAQ

WHAT IS A CLICKER?

A clicker is a small handheld noisemaker that makes a distinct "click" when it is pressed. Clicker training is a subset or restricted application of OPERANT CONDITIONING.

Clicker training is merely a tool that is used in operant conditioning. A clicker has also been called a bridge or a marker. Clicker training has been successfully used in animal training over the last couple of decades. Over 140 different species have been successfully "clicker trained". Many of the animals you have seen in movies/theatrical appearances or commercials have been clicker trained.

To put it very basically, whenever an animal performs a desired action, the handler should immediately click with a hand held clicker, then deliver a reward the animal desires (such as a tasty treat). The animal will associate the click as a marker that clues the animal when it does a specific action, they will get a reward.

WHAT IS OPERANT CONDITIONING (OC)?

OC states that much of behavior is under control of its consequences. (OC forms an association between doing a particular behavior and a consequence).

There are four possible consequences to any behavior. They are:

1. Something Good can start or be presented (positive reinforcement)
2. Something Good can end or be taken away (negative punishment)
3. Something Bad can start or be presented (positive punishment)
4. Something Bad can end or be taken away (negative reinforcement)

Consequences have to be immediate or clearly linked to the behavior. With verbal humans, we can explain the connection between the consequence and the behavior, even if they are separated by a long length of time. For example, you might tell a friend that you'll buy dinner for them since they helped you work on your car last week or a parent might explain that the child can't go to the movies because of his bad grades. With very young children, other humans who don't have verbal skills, and animals, you can't explain the connection between the consequence and the behavior. For the animal, the consequence has to be immediate. The way to work around this need for immediacy is to use a bridge (a clicker) to "mark" a behavior and then deliver the consequence.

WHAT IS POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT?

Positive reinforcement is the use of rewards (whatever an animal desires, such as food or a favorite toy) to get an animal to continually perform a desired behavior, such as sitting, laying down or shaking a paw. Rewards have to be relevant (valuable) to the particular animal. Some pets may love a particular brand of treat while others may turn their noses up at it.

WHAT IS NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT?

Negative reinforcement is when you take away something bad to get a desired behavior to increase. When you get into a car, and the seatbelt warning alarm makes a continued high pitch ring until you fasten your seat belt, the car manufacturers are using negative reinforcement. The alarm stops once you fasten your seat belt, which will increase the likely hood of you fastening the seatbelt in the future. Negative reinforcement can lead to fear responses in an animal and can actually "shut" the animal down. It is NOT an appropriate tool to use in training anything new to your animal.

WHAT IS POSITIVE PUNISHMENT?

Positive punishment is the use of verbal scolding or physical 'punishment' to get an animal to stop doing an undesirable behavior. Positive punishment can lead to aggression, as it promotes a fear-based response in an animal. Animals learn quicker by being rewarded for a particular action rather than being punished.

WHAT IS NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT?

Negative Punishment is taking away an anticipated reward. An example would be picking up the dog's leash to go for a walk but putting it down the second the dog jumps or barks at you. Negative punishment can be used to teach self control in animals as it usually only results in some frustration at first until the animal understands he can make the "good" thing come back by acting appropriately.

MY PET IS AFRAID OF THE CLICKER!

If you notice the animal is shying away from the click (the sound is unfamiliar and may frighten a stressed out pet), you can either muffle the sound so that it is not as loud, or discontinue the clicker session (if the animal seems to be very stressed, tail tucked, fearful body language, avoiding). Some ways of muffling the 'click' are as follows:

- Hide the clicker behind your back
- Place the clicker in your pocket. Click from inside your pocket.
- Wrap the clicker in a small towel

DO I HAVE TO CLICK AND TREAT EVERY TIME?

Yes!!! You are conditioning your pet to respond to the clicker and then you will be using the clicker to mark behaviors. Remember to click and immediately reward after each successful behavior that you are trying to teach. Do NOT click and then fudge on the reward. You MUST deliver a reward to the animal every time you click. Do NOT click multiple times in a row and then offer one single reward. The ratio is one click = one reward. Do NOT point the clicker at your pet like a remote control. Hold your hand casually at your side and click when your pet does something you want to reinforce (don't forget to immediately reward the pet as well!)

WHY CAN'T I USE MY VOICE INSTEAD OF THE CLICKER?

The "click" from a clicker is a very distinguishable sound. The click is non-emotional, has the same pitch and tone and is different than other sounds in the environment. Voices vary widely from person to person. The click will stay the same no matter who uses the clicker.