

Why Clicker Training?

Clicker Training is based on the science of applied animal behavior (how animals learn). It is cross species training that uses positive reinforcement, paired with the sound of an event marker such as the clicker. The clicker is a small plastic box with a metal depressor. It is used to bridge the moment between the desired behavior and the reward. When the depressor is pushed a distinctive click is heard. Unlike words that can change in tone or meaning, the click is precise, instant feedback as to the success of the task or behavior. Once conditioned the sound of the click means 'Yes!' to your animal. Absence of the click simply means 'try again'.

Karen Pryor, founder of modern clicker training, first utilized an event marker while working with marine mammals in the 1960s. Pryor needed a way to train large wild animals who were beyond the influences of restraint or manipulation. When Pryor's training and research reached the dog world in the early 90's the timing was right to generate a swell of interest and enthusiasm in this scientifically based, ethically acceptable form of training.

Clicker training can be broken into three clear parts. 1.) Observe: watch carefully for the desired behavior. 2.) Mark the desired behavior – click!. 3.) Reinforce – with a tasty treat, toy or other reward. The distinct click! marks the desired behavior, similar to a camera capturing a moment in time.

The marker (clicker) is often referred to as a conditioned reinforcer. By conditioning the animal to expect a treat when they hear the clicker, the unique sound becomes a bridge – bridging the time between the behavior and the reinforcer. As the animal becomes adept at understanding the process other reinforcers can be added; play, toys, rubs, even the opportunity to 'take a break'.

Once a behavior is learned it can be put on cue, and reinforcers become varied (toys, food, opportunity). The animal's understanding, motivation, and the task's degree of difficulty must be weighed to gauge the amount and type of reinforcement. Even after you've taught a behavior, the animal will need positive reinforcement for a job well done. The clicker can be faded once the behavior is learned.

Clicker Training is the application of years of scientific study on how organisms, all organisms, learn. All animals will choose to repeat behavior that has been reinforced. After years of working with animals, I have found clicker training to be the most natural and innovative way to teach any species. It is truly a refreshing way to communicate with and train our animals.

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