



Clicker Training Explained

By Rebecca Cox BSc (Hons)

How Dogs Learn - Learning Principles

Scientific research and the study of animals, has enabled us to understand how dogs learn. Canine learning is governed by a set of Learning Principles and if we follow these principles in our training, we can teach our dogs to do almost anything. Dogs learn by trial and error. They do what is in their interests. Dogs are opportunists; they will try a behaviour and see what the results are. If the results are good they are likely to repeat the behaviour and if they are not, they are less likely to repeat it. This forms the basis of the Principles of Learning:

Principles of Learning

Principle 1: Behaviour is determined by its results

Principle 2: Behaviour that is rewarded is likely to be repeated

Principle 3: Behaviour that is unrewarded is less likely to be repeated

Reward Based Learning

In order to train as effectively as possible it makes sense to follow these principles. Put simply, if you reward your dog for doing what you want, he is likely to repeat it. Firstly, find something that your dog finds rewarding. Food is a big motivator for most dogs, but yours may prefer something else. Throughout the day there are plenty of opportunities to reward your dog using '*life rewards*'. Life rewards are anything that your dog enjoys - going in the garden, being let off the lead, attention etc. Remember that how rewarding your dog finds something will vary depending on what else is going on - make sure that what you have on offer is better than anything else available to your dog.

Now that you have decided on a fantastic reward, you need a way to let your dog know exactly what you are rewarding him for. You need to be able to communicate in a way that your dog can understand. A lack of communication will cause confusion and hinder successful learning.

Communication and Clicking

Clicker training is a scientifically proven method that has been developed over many years to enable animal trainers to communicate accurately and effectively with their animals. Clicker training uses what is called a 'behavioural marker' - the click - to pinpoint the behaviour that you want to reward. The click sound initially has no meaning so the first step is to pair the click with a food treat so the dog makes an association between the click and food (click = food).

Next, the clicker is used to mark the behaviour that we want to reward, e.g. to reward a sit, you click when the dog sits and then give him a treat. Now, because the behaviour (sit) was rewarded, the dog is likely to do it again, and again, and again! The timing of the click is crucial - the click must come *as* the dog completes the behaviour and not before or after. The sound of the clicker tells your dog that what he has just done has earned him a reward. The click also ends the behaviour so it is perfectly acceptable for your dog to move after you have clicked and before he gets his treat.

Getting a Behaviour

So you now have a means of marking and rewarding the desired behaviour, but how do you get the dog to do the behaviour in the first place? Traditionally we physically forced dogs into position, but even if this is done gently it is hard to learn when you are being pushed around. With modern training there are a number of ways of 'getting a behaviour' without force.

You can use a piece of food to 'lure' the dog into position. This is effective but you need to be careful not to allow your dog to become dependent on the food lure. After a few goes stop luring your dog and let him work it out for himself. Try to stop having food in your hand as soon as possible. **Targeting** is another way to get a behaviour, first you teach your dog to touch or 'target' something e.g. your hand, and then you can manoeuvre him into position by moving the target. You can also 'shape' the behaviour by rewarding closer and closer approximations to the desired behaviour - for example, to shape a down, first click the dog looking at the floor, then bending his legs, then crouching and finally lying down fully. Lastly, you can just **wait** for the dog to perform the behaviour naturally and then click and treat.

Naming Behaviours

It is a waste of time to keep shouting commands to your dog because he can't understand English. It makes much more sense to teach him the physical behaviour first and then you can teach him to associate a word with that behaviour. The first step is to ensure that your dog will accurately and reliably repeat the desired behaviour in lots of different locations - at home, in the garden, on walks etc. This is called **generalising** the behaviour - if you miss out this stage your dog will only perform the behaviour where you have trained it (e.g. the dog will come when called at home because that's where you trained him, but not when he is out on walks).

When you can guarantee that your dog will perform the behaviour, you can give the behaviour a name. Naming a behaviour is referred to as 'adding a **cue**' and it is done when the dog has learned the physical behaviour and not before. Add the cue (command) just as the dog is about to perform the behaviour. If you started off using a hand signal, add the new word cue *before* you give the signal. Your dog will soon start to associate the new cue with his behaviour and he will quickly learn that if he performs the desired behaviour when he hears the cue, he will get a click and a treat. It will take many repetitions, in many different places, before your dog has thoroughly made the connection between the cue and the behaviour.

Clicking Training Stages

1. Use luring, targeting or shaping to get your dog to perform the desired behaviour, alternatively wait for him to do it naturally
2. Click *as* your dog completes the behaviour (timing is crucial).
3. Reward your dog (the reward comes *after* the click and not at the same time)
4. Repeat in many locations until your dog immediately and accurately performs the behaviour
5. Add a cue (command) just before your dog does the behaviour, practice in many places
6. Only reward the behaviour if you give the cue first and then only reward fast, accurate responses
7. Make sure your dog matches the right behaviour with the right cue ("sit" = a sit and not a down)
8. Phase out the clicker and treats and start to reward on an occasional, random basis

NB: Never use the clicker to get your dog's attention and always follow the click with a reward.

Clicking Forever?

Once your dog has learned a particular behaviour then you can stop using the clicker. The clicker is used to teach new behaviours and to re-touch old behaviours when necessary. It is important to keep rewarding your dog even if it is only occasionally - remember that dogs only repeat behaviours that they find rewarding. There is no need to only use food as a reward, use play, freedom, access to the garden, fuss, praise and attention - in fact you can use anything that your dog wants as a reward.