

## Clicker Training: What's the Big Deal?

By Joyce Miller

- *"Thank you, thank you--clicker training is a miracle! "*
- *"It was just stunning 'eureka, I get it' moment of a dog making a connection."*
- *"My dog who used to lunge and bark frantically is now a different dog: he enjoys playing with other dogs. "*
- *"My six- year-old dog never came when called. After ONE afternoon with the clicker, he comes when called!!!!"*
- *"I have a young rescue dog who was incorrigible...With the clicker, she was soon behaving nicely both on and off leash and having fun with tricks like jumping through hoops!"*
- *"Using a clicker, it took me five minutes to teach my dog to stop pulling on the leash after three years of her taking me for walks. This is a great tool for working with older dogs."*
- *"This is the first dog I have trained with a clicker: she can do more things and learns faster than any other dog I've ever had."*
- *"Clicker training is the most compelling kind of dog training that I have ever seen...no dog should be without this information."*
- *"This training really works and anybody can do it!!"*
- *"I went to a clicker seminar before we brought our new puppy home: it made all the difference in how we trained."*

These comments were all made by people who discovered the miracle of clicker training and how it could help overcome problems people have every day with regular approaches to training.

**Why does training not work?** If you live with dogs, you have probably marveled over how dogs know what the doorbell means, what the can opener means, what is going to happen when you put on your coat or pack your suitcase, even how they know when someone is coming home. No doubt about it; dogs are smart.

In fact, dogs learn more from us than what we teach them. They watch us endlessly: they study us, learn our personalities, seem to intuitively know what we want or what we are going to do—not that they always do it. In fact, I think they have a special antenna that tells them when they do not have to worry about paying attention to what we are trying to tell them.

With all the attention they pay us, why then, do we have so much difficulty training them not to jump on strangers, to come when they are called, to sit or down quietly while we eat, to respect our space? Could it be that we are not making use of their intelligence in the training process?

**Positive Reinforcement.** There are several approaches to training with positive reinforcement that make use of your dog's intelligence and require your dog to use his or her mind to figure things out. And there is no doubt about it, just as with the doorbell, the

suitcase, and other things they learn on their own, when your dog uses his mind to learn something, he does not forget what he learns.

**Clicker Training.** One of these positive approaches to dog training is called *clicker training*. Clicker training is, according to Peggy Tillman author of *Clicking With Your Dog*, a simple proven way to communicate with your dog using positive reinforcement. Using a small plastic clicker that makes a unique sound, you can tell your dog, “Yes, that is what I want you to do,” and your dog remembers that you liked what he offered you. Although the use of the clicker is based on a scientific concept, *operant conditioning*, you do not have to understand scientific theory to use the clicker. The method is so effective that young children can use it very effectively, and many working, service and entertainment dogs are routinely trained with this method.

Scientifically, clicker training is training that is founded in the established principles of 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. Trainers needed to find a 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 or going outside. 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, followed by a treat, the primary reinforcer.

**Regardless of the science behind it, to your dog, clicker training is one big, fun game!** The game is simple: you have something the dog wants (a treat or a toy), and she must do something for you in order to get it. To the dog, it boils down to one question: “What do I have to do to get this nice person to do what I want?” So, as your dog figures out how to control you and get her prize, the dog gives you what you want the dog to do. What could be more rewarding for both of you: a true win-win situation.

**Are you wedded to the clicker forever once you start?** No. The clicker is a training tool: as soon as your dog learns the behavior, you will never need the clicker again to get that particular behavior. A friend's dog entertained a group of Airedale lovers with her “Get a cool one” trick. The dog, on command went to a small beer cooler, opened it, and took out a bottle (a plastic bottle that looked like a beer). The trick was worthy of an ad for the Super Bowl! My own dog, Buster, learned how bow for the queen. Once these two dogs knew these tricks, they were always ready to show them off when



**Buster bows**

their handler simply gave the command to get a cool one or who's the queen. Likewise, a dog that is clicker trained to heel on a loose lead, to sit politely when a guest enters your home, that lies down quietly while you eat your dinner, and comes happily when you call will do all of those behaviors without a clicker.

**The emphasis is on “happily.” Clicker training is fun.** Both you and the dog will look forward to your sessions. Each session will begin when you pick up the clicker, and as you progress, that becomes the cue for your dog to offer you a stream of behaviors. “Do you want me to sit? . . . to down . . . to come . . . to touch the door . . .” he seems to ask, tail wagging, ears alert. And depending on what you are planning to train that day, you will click when the dog offers you a behavior that is also the start of what you want to train.

**Who's the Queen?** For example, when we trained Buster to bow, we started with a down that he offered. Since it was a behavior he knew well, I only clicked it the first time he did it. Then I just stood there with him lying down and watching me. He got frustrated: obviously, the nice lady was not going to give him the treat for down. He got up; he pranced around. He offered me another behavior. No treat. Finally, he got very cute about it and teased me with a play bow. I clicked and gave him a treat. Then I stood there. He tried to do another down, then a sit, then the play bow. I clicked the play bow and gave him a treat. Then I stood straight. Immediately, he did the play bow. Yes! I clicked. We did that several times, and then we stopped for the day.

The next day, when I picked up the clicker, I immediately got a play bow. Yes! So this time, as he went into the play bow, I said “who's the queen?”, clicked and treated the play bow. We did this for about 10 minutes. The next day, all I had to do was ask the question (give the cue): “Who's the queen?” He immediately did the play bow, and I clicked it and treated it. From then on, I did not have to use the clicker or a treat. All I had to do was ask the question, “Who's the Queen?” and Buster responded with a cute play bow! He loved doing it; we loved watching him do it; and he amused a lot of people with this simple trick.

**But clicker training is not just for tricks.** Often a dog is confused and really does not know what you want. Using a clicker, you can now communicate very clearly to your dog what you want. Or an older dog that has been adopted has some negative associations with training and does not seem to pay attention to you. The clicker can help the dog learn what you want, and it can certainly help focus the dog's attention on you. For example, consider the dog that won't look at you. Just stand there. It may seem like forever. Watch the dog. Don't watch TV, look around you, or talk on the phone. You want the dog to pay attention so you pay attention to the dog. Then suddenly the dog takes one quick peek at you, and you click and treat. Then you both go back to what you were doing, but you keep your eye on the dog. There, another peek; another click and another treat. After a few repetitions, you can almost see the light bulb come on: “If I look at her, she will reward me.” And suddenly, the dog is looking at you all the time. You have his attention. What could be simpler?

**No dog is too young or too old to enjoy this happy way of training.** We saw an older dog take a new lease on training with the clicker. The owner had brought the dog to one of our club's clicker seminars because she had not been able to establish a bond with the dog; the dog would not look at her; and the dog ignored every attempt at training. The owner was thinking of surrendering the dog to rescue. Before the first morning had ended, the dog was glued to the owner, and once the attention was established, new behaviors tumbled out of the dog, much to the owner's delight and relief.

Puppies love the clicker. They seem to think that it is their birthright to grow up communicating in this simple and effective way with their human companions. In fact, Corally Burmaster, an Airedale breeder and clicker trainer, starts training her own puppies with the clicker when they are five weeks old.

So whether your dog is young or old, if you would like to do more training with your dog and develop a more rewarding bond with your dog, you might want to consider the clicker. You can train all the behaviors for the Canine Good Citizenship test with the clicker. You can teach an endless stream of tricks with the clicker. And through it all, you can have so much fun that you can forget about prong collars, the hard work that training used to be, and join the thousands of people who do their training in short fun-filled segments whenever they have a moment with their dog.

If you like the sound of this way of training your dog, here are some resources that you can explore to learn more about clicker training:

**Websites:**

[www.clickandtreat.com](http://www.clickandtreat.com)

[www.clickertrain.com](http://www.clickertrain.com)

[www.clickertraining.com](http://www.clickertraining.com)

**Books:**

Morgan Spector, *Clicker Training for Obedience : Shaping Top Performance – Positively*

Karen Pryor, *Don't Shoot the Dog*

Karen Pryor, *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Dogs*

Melissa Alexander, *Click for Joy*

Mandy Book & Cheryl Smith, *Quick Clicks*

Pat Miller, *Power of Positive Dog Training*

Deb Jones, *Click and Sniff*

Peggy Tillman, *Clicking with Your Dog*

Gail Fisher, *Clicker Training Manual*

Deb Jones, *Clicker Fun*

M. Shirley Chong, *A Clicker Cookbook With Training Schedule*

**Videos:**

Corally Burmaster, *Puppy Kindergarten* (video)

Deb Jones, *Click and Go* (video)

Gary Wilkes, *Click and Treat Training*

Gary Wilkes, *On Target*

Gary Wilkes, *Doggie Repair Kit*

**E-list:**

*ClickerSolutions* at Yahoo Groups

**Seminars:** check with your local breed clubs, rescue groups, and other dog organizations to find out if anyone is bringing in one of the experts listed above to do a clicker seminar. Also, do a Google search on any of the experts above and find out if they have a schedule of seminars—they might be doing one not too far from you.