

# **CLICKER TRAINING FOR DOGS**

## **Click, Treat, Reward, Win!**

*“Clicker training is easy to learn with the right instructions — it's rewarding and founded on positive reinforcement.”*

People often think of clicker training as a fast and easy way to teach basic obedience commands, such as “sit” or “come,” but it can also quickly shape your dog's behaviours in ways that establish a productive and happy relationship, right from the start.

Clickers are a fun and fast way to speed up your dog's learning process.

In this easy to follow, simple guide we'll explain the origins, benefits and implementation techniques that will allow you to get an informed introduction to the dog training phenomenon that has won so much support and respect all over the world.



# The Origins of Clicker Training

***Stephen King is a dog behaviour expert and author. Here he gives you the low-down on the history of the clicker training method for animal behaviour modification.***

The origins of clicker training were based on a science and a technology developed by one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century, B.F. Skinner.

Skinner's entire system is based on something called operant conditioning. To explain the mechanics of operant conditioning, imagine a rat in a cage. A special cage (called, in fact, a "Skinner box") that has a bar or pedal on one wall that, when pressed, causes a little mechanism to release a food pellet into the cage.

The rat is bouncing around the cage, doing whatever it is rats do, when he accidentally presses the bar and -- hey, presto! -- a food pellet falls into the cage!

The operant is the behaviour just prior to the food pellet falling into the rat's possession. This is called 'the reinforcer'. In no time at all, the rat is furiously peddling away at the bar, hoarding his pile of pellets in the corner of the cage.

In plain and simple terms, a behaviour followed by a reinforcing stimulus results in an increased probability of that behaviour occurring in the future.

Just like when you were a baby and you worked out if you wailed your little heart out, Mummy was likely to be on hand within seconds attending to your every whim! You learn a behaviour which produces, in this case, a pleasurable or desirable outcome.

What dog trainers refer today as clicker training today is a slang term for Applied Operant Conditioning which was initially developed on the foundations of Skinner's work more than sixty years ago by a trio called Keller Breland, Marian Breland Bailey and Bob Bailey who ran a company called Animal Behaviour Enterprises (ABE) which started in 1943.

ABE trainers trained more than 140 different species, and tens of thousands of animals including Dogs, Cats, Parrots, Dolphins, Crows, Seagulls, Rabbits and even Chickens and they are recognised as the first company to use operant conditioning in this way.

Somehow, however, the technology did not transfer from these early pioneer trainers to the general public until 1992 when Karen Pryor, Gary Wilkes, Gary Priest, and Ingrid Kang Shallenberger got together at a seminar for operant conditioning animal trainers.

Shortly after that meeting Karen Pryor and Gary Wilkes put together the first Don't Shoot the Dog! Clicker training seminar for a group of 250 dog-training enthusiasts, it was only then that the ball started to roll in the USA.

From 1992 until 1994 there were a few clicker trainers in the UK, myself being one of them. In 1994 the late John Fisher and myself met Karen Pryor in Chicago USA to organise a UK visit, which happened in 1995.

It has taken more than a decade, but the use of clicker training methodology to train companion animals is now fairly widespread in the UK.

In August 1996 I ran the first ever Clicker Training Workshop at Crosskeys here in Romford and in 1998 I produced a Puppy training video called Your Puppy's Early Learning, which sold throughout the world and is still selling today along with what has now become a plethora of books, videos, DVDs and other media products covering this truly fascinating subject.

## **The Advantages of Clicker Training**

Clicker training differs in a number of ways from standard or traditional dog training. Firstly, we use primary reinforcers (rewards) that most dogs like and will work for, such as food, (with no deprivation), toys, attention and touching. Secondly, we omit the use of punishment within the training program such as, force, aversive methods, sprays, half checks or choke collars to get results, therefore it is safe and effective even when used with puppy's a few weeks old.

Whilst we see dog owners scolding their dog during daily life routines, we avoid all forms of punishment, whether it is positive or negative punishment as much as we can as a learning tool.

The training sessions are very short, perhaps just a few minutes: no long repetitions, we make steady progress, and move on. We also include a vast amount of variety in the training, in the behaviours being taught and as previously mentioned in the rewards that are used.

One result of this is that we are seeing very clearly in our dogs the occurrence of accelerated learning. In our training classes we see many behaviours which are learnt, that with standard training, take months, even YEARS, to establish with any degree of reliability.

With clicker training, standard behaviours and repertoires are being accomplished in five weeks and even less.

“Primary reinforcers are those which are immediately reinforcing and are simply reinforcing as a result of the dog's evolution as a species.”

## Which Dogs Benefit From Clicker Training?

Clicker training works with all breeds, all ages, and all types of dogs even with deaf dogs, in which case the clicker would be substituted for a penlight flash.

Dogs that have been trained using traditional methods usually show an amazing amount of progress when introduced to clicker training methods.

Training Tip: For “Cross-over dog trainers, don’t begin with a behaviour the dog already knows – try something completely different. For example, if your dog already has a great grasp of ‘the sit and stay’, when starting them with clicker training work on a completely new command that you have never tried to teach them before.



## **Clicker Training To 'Fix' Problem Behaviour**

Clicker training can be used for the simplest training task to some of the most complex behavioural problems that you may ever come across.

The advantages of using clicker training first and foremost are that we are using the science and technology of learning rather than tradition and folklore, in other words it uses the laws of learning that are always in effect, and with clicker training, learning models or rules are applied to an animal's behaviour in order to predict consequences and work toward increasing certain behaviours (the behaviour we desire from the dog), or decreasing other behaviours (the behaviour we don't like from the dog).

Clicker training works because it is founded on established scientific principles governing the learning process.

When training a dog to do anything from agility, fly ball, search and rescue to just basic good dog manners involves operant behaviours meaning behaviour that is influenced by the events which immediately follow a specific action.

In other words, with operant behaviour the dog is acting on the environment as much as the environment is acting on the dog. If the dog begs and food follows, it is likely that the dog will repeat that behaviour. If a dog barks and attention follows, it is likely that the dog will repeat that behaviour.

The dog learns that its behaviour has consequences. Understanding how a dog learns gives us an advantage in that we can use these rules with certainty and immediacy to either increase or decrease the frequency of that behaviour.

## About 'The Clicker'

The clicker is NOT just a mechanical noisemaker.

A clicker is a child's toy that animal trainers have decided to use to reinforce an animal's behaviour. The clicker is a small metal and plastic device that makes a double clicking sound when pressed.

Using a clicker instead of your voice gives us a tool that makes a unique sound that has never been heard before and usually doesn't have any pre-existing associations. The signal is consistent, and deliverable with precision, even from a distance.

Use of the clicker allows your dog to learn that whatever behaviour causes a click will be reinforced, useful information to the dog as it predicts the availability of a reinforcer so that the behaviour is likely to be repeated. It is also an event marker - the click marks the behaviour as it occurs.

The click also marks the end of the behaviour, and you are now ready to start again. Clicker training has another good effect on the more experienced dog, the sound of the first click becomes a context marker, or to put it informally, it tells the dog the training "game" is on and that there is a chance of reinforcement.

When the clicks eventually stop, your dog will know that the "game" has finished. What clicker training can also achieve for your dog is a change in motivation, which can result in a confidence boost! Think about how your dog reacts to seeing their lead.

Usually they get very excited and are in a state of great pleasure. You have not trained this behaviour but it is an example of a reinforcer i.e lead comes out = very good chance we're going for a walk. Imagine being able to generate such an emotive response to all your commands!

## Clicker Training in Action

There is no procedure more important in dog training than reinforcement. It is worth taking the time to describe some basic rules for using reinforcement effectively:

1) Define the target (desired) behaviour. It's best to literally write down a brief description of the behaviour or set of behaviours that would qualify for reinforcement (i.e. a behaviour that if increased would benefit the dog and owner). In puppies you could aim for lengthening their attention span, for example.

2) Choose the appropriate reinforcers. Before you can reinforce target behaviour, you have to choose one or more reinforcers. The most important thing to remember is never to use negative reinforcers if positive reinforcers are available. The second thing to remember is that positive reinforcers are always available. Conditioned reinforcers such as a clicker paired with some tasty food, or a clicker paired with a chew tug game will be just the job for increasing that desired behaviour.

3) Make the reinforcement immediate and certain (click and treat). Using a clicker allows you to mark the behaviour just as it happens. The more closely that reinforcement follows the target behaviour the more likely it is to be effective. Any delay in delivering the signal may result in the wrong behaviours being reinforced.

For example, puppy sits and you click and treat. If you delay the chances are that the puppy has stood up, scratched, barked, or otherwise added some unwanted behaviour. By certain I refer to the fact that the more likely the target behaviour is to result in reinforcement the more rapidly the behaviour is to increase in strength. In other words the best results are usually obtained when reinforcement is almost certain to occur when the target behaviour occurs, but is unlikely to occur otherwise.

4) Observe the results. Observing the results is an essential part of the training process. Learning to perceive the difference that makes the difference. Learning to observe your dog, when to reinforce or not, and when to raise your criteria will become easier with time and experience. As will, most importantly, having the patience to allow your dog to work through these procedures so that it will heighten your dog's performance and improve his creativity for learning.

Learning to perceive the changes that makes the difference in the dog is known as the "art of reinforcement" and the only way of achieving fantastic results is to go out and do it. I would suggest finding a training partner who can observe your performance and give you general guidance with your timing and movement around your dog.

Try clicking one of your family with their movements, the goal behaviour for example would be to get the clicks right on target. Click somebody walking, clicking when his or her left foot hits the ground, and then try the right foot. Have a friend bounce a ball and you have to click just as the ball hits the ground, then click when the ball is half way up from the bounce, and see how many you can get on target.

Try throwing the ball onto a wall some distance from you and try to click just as the ball hits the wall, this will help for distance work, as getting the timing right is crucial.

## **Are There any Disadvantages to Clicker Training?**

After 12 years of clicker training different species of animals, the only disadvantage that I have seen for beginner trainers, in that task of learning any new skill or behaviour can be broken down into four distinct stages. The first stage would be unconscious incompetence.

That is to say that not only do you not yet know how to do something, but that you are also unaware of it. Take the example of learning to drive. Initially, never having driven a car you have no idea what it is like. Once you start to learn you quickly discover your limitations. You need four pairs of hands, eyes in the back of your head, and please no-one try to hold a conversation!!

Several lessons later and you are able to manage the controls, steer, coordinate the clutch, watch the road and so on. It demands all your attention, you are not yet competent, and you keep to the back roads. This is the stage of conscious incompetence when you grind the gears, over-steer and give cyclists heart attacks. Although this is uncomfortable (especially for cyclists), it is the stage when you learn the most. Next comes the stage of conscious competence.

You can drive the car, but it takes all your concentration. You have learned the skill but you have not yet mastered it. The final stage is unconscious competence. All those patterns that you have learned so painstakingly blend together into one smooth unit of behaviour.

Now you can listen to the radio, take in the scenery, and hold a conversation at the same time as driving. Your conscious mind sets the outcome and leaves it to your unconscious mind to carry it out, freeing your attention for other things. When you practice something for long enough you will reach this fourth stage and have formed solid, reliable behaviours.

Clicker training animal's behaviour is no different, learning models or rules like those above are applied to an animal's behaviour in order to predict consequences and work toward increasing certain behaviours (those we like), or decreasing other behaviours (those we don't like).



## Clicker Training - The Long Term Effects

Clicker training is used to teach/learn new behaviours. Once the behaviour is learned the clicker isn't needed any more for that behaviour although praise and treats will always be appreciated. Whenever you want to train a new behaviour, or fine -tune an old one, use the clicker.

Clicker Cue Cards are available for all breeds of dog from six weeks to 16 years. They are an affordable (less than £5), kind and effective training program the whole family can use. There are also videos, books and other insightful informational products available such as:

Video: Clicker Train Your Dog for beginners to advanced. (RRP)£14.99

Books: Ready, Steady, Click! For the more serious student. (RRP)£9.99

Ready, Steady, Click! Workbook, Put into practice what you have learnt in theory. (RRP)£6.99



Clicker Training Kit



Mikki Fun Tricks Clicker Training kit



Target Stick



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## **A Fad or Technique That's Here To Stay?**

The technology used in Clicker Training is “cutting edge”, although research is continuing in the field of applied behaviour analysis, it may take another 100 years also before science uncovers a technique capable of superseding the principles on which clicker training is founded. With that said, it's fair to say clicker training is no fad and will be around for a very, very long time!

Sounds Great but do I Need to be Einstein to Understand all I Need To Know?

Definitely not, in fact a complete lack of dog training or canine psychological knowledge could be a major advantage if you're thinking of taking up the clicker training challenge with your dog.

Clicker training is easy to learn with the right instructions — it's rewarding and founded in positive reinforcement.

A part of clicker training that may take some practice is timing which, as I have already mentioned can be practised on friends and family before you let loose on a pet!

Don't worry about getting things wrong. Clicker training is so forgiving and so much fun for everyone that you don't have to worry about mistakes. They won't interfere with the training in the long run.

Clicker training is a worldwide phenomenon and each country now has numerous trainers and behaviour specialists using applied operant condition, clicker training. It's a technique that works and it's here to stay so why not see if you can click your dog into action?

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This book has been carefully prepared, researched and edited by a team of canine information experts. Our authors are, first and foremost, passionate about dogs and share a mutual satisfaction in assisting people who are experiencing problems with their pets. Our works have been read by more than 12 million pet owners globally.

