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Getting Started with the Clicker

The easiest way to start clicker training is to teach your dog to hand target. During this process your dog will learn that the click sound ALWAYS means a treat is coming, and he'll learn that offering a specific behavior earns a click/treat. This will become the foundation for teaching all sorts of new behaviors.

What you need:

- A clicker

- Tasty, soft, bite-sized treats – try hot dogs, cheese, chicken, or beef cut into 1/4 inch cubes. Place about 15-20 treats in a small bowl

- A quiet place with no distractions that has a table or counter on which you can place the treat bowl so that it is too high for the dog to reach.

Step one: Practicing without the dog

Without your dog around, practice clicking and transferring one food treat from the treat bowl to an empty bowl. This may seem a little silly, but clicker training involves mechanical skills and you want to get familiar with the "equipment" and the rhythm of the clicker game.

So, click **once** (the click is a quick two-beat sound), and deliver a treat from one bowl to another. Repeat until this feels comfortable and natural. When you see the abbreviation C/T, this is what you will do, only you'll deliver the treat to the dog.

Step two: "Charging" the clicker

Now bring your dog into the room. He should be mildly hungry. He need not be on leash, but if you need to keep him on leash to keep him close at first, just stand on the end of it so he can't wander off. Once he starts playing the game, he'll want to stay close and you won't need the leash anymore.

Click and give your dog a treat from the bowl on the table. Do not reach toward the bowl until you have clicked. Do this about 10 times. Make sure the dog is in different positions when he hears the click (sitting, standing, facing you from the front, facing you from the side, etc.).

Repeat this session two times.

To test whether the dog understands that click=treat, wait until he is interested in something (not you) and click. If he turns to you looking for a treat, you know he's got the click/treat association. Now you're ready to start using the clicker to mark behaviors that you want the dog to do.

Step three: Teaching target

With your treats close by and your clicker in one hand, put your free hand an inch or two directly in front of your dog's nose. Your hand should be open and flat, palm out. When the dog sniffs your hand, C/T. You can feed the treat directly to the dog or throw it on the floor – make sure he sees it. Remove your target hand (put it behind your back) as you C/T. Repeat this about three times.

On the fourth time, move your hand a little to one side; on the next time, move your hand a little to the other side. Always C/T when the dog touches your hand with his nose. Be sure that you are not moving your hand into his nose.

Now present your hand a little higher, than a little lower, then a little further away from his nose (six inches). Always C/T when the dog touches your hand with his nose.

Now present your hand a little further away so that your dog must take a step or two to get to it. If he doesn't move, move your body around a little to see if you can get him up and moving (some dogs get stuck in the "sit" position if they have been rewarded for this in the past). Do this "moving" touch three or four times, then end your training session.

End your training session with a verbal cue, such as "all done." It's often nice to end a training session with some petting, some play, or a walk.

Tips:

- Keep the game moving and fun – your 15-20 clicks should happen in the space of two to three minutes.
- Try to avoid bending at the waist while training. Bend at the knees so that you are not looming over the dog. With a small dog it may be best to work on your knees, or alternatively, to put the dog up on a bench or table.
- End the session before your dog does, but if he loses interest before you stop, end the session and come back a little later. Sometimes dogs need a little time to process the new thing they are learning, so don't get discouraged by this.
- If you can, do three to four of these short sessions a day. If you can only do one, that's okay too. Your dog will remember what he learned and make progress either way.
- Remember click always means treat, so even if you make a mistake and click in error, he must receive a treat.

Moving On

- A good way to be sure your dog understands this behavior is to hold your hand high enough that he must lift his front feet off the floor to touch it. Once he offers this behavior, you can be fairly sure he understands what you want him to do.
- Adding a verbal cue – for this particular behavior, the cue is putting your hand out. No verbal cue is needed, but we humans like verbal cues, so if you want to add one, here's how. Once the dog is offering the behavior as soon as he sees your hand, start saying the cue word "touch" *as he touches his nose to your hand*. This way he is associating the word with his action. Do this for about two training sessions. In the next training session, say "touch" just before his nose touches your hand. Then, in subsequent sessions, say "touch" as you offer your hand. Now you have a verbal cue!
- Variable Schedule of Reinforcement – you have been using a "continuous schedule of reinforcement" which means the dog gets a treat every time he performs the behavior. Now you're ready to move to a variable schedule of reinforcement, meaning he only gets a treat sometimes. Only C/T every third, sixth, second, fourth, or tenth time he performs the behavior.
- Where to put the darn treats – if you started with the treats in a bowl, and now you're doing this behavior in other locations, you probably have already run into the problem of where to keep your treats. It's handy to buy a "bait bag" that you wear at your waist; this can be a bag made specifically for dog training or just a fanny pack. A carpenter's apron works well as does any kitchen apron with pockets.
- Once your dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue (i.e., he will do the behavior when you give the verbal cue at least 90% of the time) on a variable schedule of reinforcement, you don't really need the clicker any more for that behavior. You should still reward your dog often with praise and variably with a food treat, but you don't need the clicker any more--until you're ready to teach a new behavior!

Having fun with hand targeting

Now that your dog knows how to hand target, there are lots of fun things you can teach him!

The Moving Touch

Heel: Standing straight, put your left hand by your left side, palm facing back; with the dog behind you, say "touch," but move several steps forward before allowing your dog to make contact with your hand. C/T when he touches. Gradually increase the number of steps he must take to touch your hand. Now begin saying "heel" as you walk forward – you have a new behavior! For small dogs, it is easier to transfer the touch cue to a dowel or target stick first (see below), then have the dog follow the stick instead of your hand.

Weave: Stand with your legs apart and your dog in front of you. Put your right hand (or touch stick for a small dog) between and behind your legs and say "touch" to get him to move through your legs. Now put your left hand out in front of you, encouraging him to come around your right leg, and say "touch" again. Put your left hand between and behind your legs and say touch so he moves between your legs again. Again put your right hand in front of your legs to encourage him to come around your left leg to the front and say "touch". When he starts to move smoothly around your legs, change the cue to "weave."

Come: With your dog in front of you – hold your hand in front of you and say "touch." Gradually increase the distance he must come to get to your hand. When he is coming from distance of ten feet or so, change your cue to "come" or "here."

On or Up: If you want your dog to hop up on the couch, or hop on the scale at the veterinarian's office – use your "touch" cue. Hold your hand over the couch or scale and say "touch" so the dog has to hop up on the object to reach your hand. You might have to start with a lower object at first if he is reluctant to jump up on a higher surface. When he is freely offering the behavior in response to your outstretched hand, change your cue to "on" or "up."

Puppy Nipping: Touch is also a good alternative, incompatible behavior for puppy nipping. When your pup is inclined to mouth you, ask for the "touch" behavior. This gives him something else to do instead of nipping at you.

Transferring the "Touch" Cue to a New Object

Find the . . . : Do you have something you misplace regularly – your car keys, glasses, remote control or cell phone? You can teach your dog to help you find it, using the touch cue. Hold your keys in your hand and give your "touch" cue. Do this four or five times. Now hold the keys so that your dog's nose will touch the keys first. C/T only for nose touches to the keys, not the ones to your hand. Put your hand with the keys on the floor and C/T for touches to the keys. Now take your hand away and C/T if your dog touches the keys with his nose. Don't worry if he is confused at first and tries to touch your hand. Shape the behavior if you need to – i.e., C/T if he looks at the keys or for any

movement toward the keys. Be patient – he'll get it. If he's having trouble with this behavior, jackpot (give four or five treats instead of one) when he finally touches the keys on the floor. Once he's offering the new behavior (touching the keys with his nose) add the new cue "find my keys." Now start making the keys harder to find – put them further away, put them under a pillow or ottoman.

Tips:

- When introducing a new behavior, go back to a continuous schedule of reinforcement.
- Lower the value of your treats – as your dog starts to enjoy the clicker game, you may find you can use lower-value treats (like kibble); save higher value treats for more difficult situations or for jackpots.
- Remember to reduce your dog's meal size for the amount of treats you are feeding during training.