

INTRO TO CLICKER/BRIDGE TRAINING

“Training is a mechanical skill”

–Bob Bailey

T = treat; some type of small yummy, easily swallowed food item that the dog likes *at that particular moment*

R = reinforcer; anything the dog perceives as reinforcing at that particular moment: food & the opportunity to play are typical reinforcers for a dog

VB = verbal bridge (human vocal sound such as “yes,” “right,” “bing,” or “ding”)

C/R = click immediately followed by a reinforcer

VB/R = verbal bridge immediately followed by a reinforcer

A clicker is a small handheld noisemaker that makes a distinct “click” when it is pressed. We will teach your dog that the sound of the clicker means that what he just did was correct and a reinforcer is now coming. Think of the click like a camera. It takes a snapshot of your dog at a particular moment. This gives your dog exact information on what behaviors are “correct”.

The click sound is also known as a bridge. It “bridges” the time from when your dog does a correct behavior until the moment you can deliver the reinforcer. *The delivery of the reinforcer can be as important as the click itself when teaching new behaviors.* This type of training encourages your dog to think while learning and it eliminates the need for physical corrections (such as hitting, jerking the leash or shouting at the dog).

A “click” can be any distinct noise (click of a pen, bottle cap, whistle, etc.). The human voice can also be used, picking a single distinct sounding word (such as “yes,” “right,” “bing,” “ding,” etc.) The problem with using your voice to shape new behaviors is that your voice often sounds different depending on your mood, volume, and even if you have a cold! *However*, teaching a bridge using the human voice is extremely advantageous for weaning off the clicker once behaviors are at a finished state as well as for maintaining behaviors.

It is *highly* recommended that you also teach a verbal bridge in addition to using a clicker. The same training/learning principles apply to a verbal bridge as a “click” so just insert the word verbal bridge (VB) anywhere you see “click”.

Clicker training can be used to teach simple behaviors (such as sit, down, stay) or more complicated behaviors (such as tricks or precision work for competition obedience or agility). It can also be used to help solve many behavior problems such as aggression and fear. Since clicker training is a no-force method, it is ideal to use with nervous or fearful dogs as well as aggressive dogs.

Clicker training is ideal for “shaping” behavior. Shaping involves breaking behavior down into a series of small steps (or criteria) that will eventually lead to a final picture for the dog. This is also called “splitting.” Each step is reinforced with a click/reinforcer as you build toward your end behavior.

BASIC CLICKER GUIDELINES

One click = one reinforcer. Click and then always reinforce your dog as quickly as possible. Make sure you are clicking first with a neutral body stance, *then* moving to give a treat or tossing a favorite toy to your dog. Have someone watch you train to make sure you are clicking *before* you move your hand or body to reinforce your dog.

Always follow the click with a treat or some other type of reinforcer that your dog considers valuable at that time. The click will quickly lose its significance if you are clicking and then not giving some valuable reinforcer.

Always deliver the reinforcer in such a way that it helps you with the behavior you are training. For instance, if your dog tends to jump off the contact before you release him, then always deliver the treat to him (so he doesn’t move out of place) rather than clicking and having the dog run to you to get the reinforcer. If you are working on distance training, then always deliver the reinforcer out and away

from you in the direction of travel that you want the dog to take (but of course, *after* clicking!)

Always deliver your reinforcer as quickly as possible after clicking. From the time you click to the time the dog actually receives the reinforcer, the dog is being reinforced for whatever behavior is happening at that very nanosecond.

Always try to click during the behavior. Timing is most critical when using any training method and clicker training really drives this lesson home. If you are late in clicking, your dog will not learn quickly and may actually learn the wrong behavior. Trainer Bob Bailey says, “You get what you click, not necessarily what you want.”

Do not say anything while your dog is learning. Don’t try to urge him on with verbal help such as “You almost got it!” or “SOOO close!” This just confuses your dog. Let the click guide your dog (like the Hot & Cold game we played as kids). *It is the dog’s responsibility to figure out what you are clicking for and it is your responsibility to time your click appropriately.* Once your dog gets a click and reinforcer, then you can then add your verbal praise such as “good dog!”

Do not use any verbal or physical corrections. *The clicker training sessions should create a safe environment for your dog to learn new behaviors.* If your dog does the incorrect behavior, you simply do not click. The absence of the click gives a clicker-savvy dog as much information as a click itself.

Add a verbal cue only after the behavior is learned. Once the behavior is predictable (you can bet it will happen within two to three seconds), and it looks the way you want it to, then start to add a verbal cue. Just *before* the dog repeats the behavior, say your chosen cue word. When the dog does the behavior, click and reinforce. For some dogs, *it can take anywhere from 30-60 repetitions to attach a cue word to a behavior, so be patient!*

Click for small steps toward your final goal. Raise your standards (criteria) ever so slightly each two to three clicks until you have reached your final goal. It

is helpful if you break down the final behavior into small steps before you start to train. Write it down on paper first so you know when to C/R. As Bob Bailey says, “Be a splitter, not a lumpier.”

How often are you reinforcing? To quote Bob Bailey again, “Training must be worthwhile for all.” If the criterion you set is too difficult, then you will not be clicking very often. The rate of reinforcement will be low and your dog will lose interest, and/or become frustrated and give up (stop working). For a novice clicker dog, a click every two to five seconds is a good rule of thumb. That does not mean you click for nothing; it means that you break the behavior down into small enough criteria to keep the rate of reinforcement high enough to keep the dog interested.

Frustration can be in the form of barking, biting, and hyperactivity. Split your criteria up even more if you are getting any of these.

Losing interest can be in the form of sniffing, yawning (stress signal!), walking away, or giving up (laying down, no attention/focus, no offering of behavior when normally the dog would offer). Again, *split* the criteria smaller so that you are clicking every two to five seconds!

Do *not* reinforce (click) a strong innate response such as barking or spinning. It will be very hard to extinguish later. The innate response will come out later for the slightest pause in the rate of reinforcement.

Train for short time periods. Take two to three minutes per session to work your dog, but try to do at least three to five sessions per day. Quit before your dog is tired or uninterested. If that means you only work two-minute sessions with your dog on a particular day then that is fine.

Vary your treats and reinforcers. Instead of always giving hot dogs, for example, prepare a container that is a mixture of things. (My dogs love raisins, Pepperidge Farm Gold Fish, little bits of hot dogs, cheese, lunch meat, roast beef, and cat food). Or

after a click, let the dog tug on his favorite toy or chase a ball a short distance instead of giving food.

Higher distracting environments require a higher value treat. When working in your front yard or at the park or in any distracting environment, use high-value treats to motivate your dog to work with you. I carry things such as roast beef, hamburger, garlic chicken, cheese, hot dogs, Vienna sausages, and even fish. Find out what really turns your dog's salivary glands on and then save those treats for highly distracting environments. If your dog just doesn't seem to be very food motivated, make sure to check with a qualified sports veterinarian. Most dogs tend to be overweight and thus the lack of interest in food.

When shaping new behaviors, start in the least distracting environment. Start somewhere quiet in the house with *no* other activities going. If you have multiple dogs, put the other dog behind closed doors with a nice stuffed Kong to keep them occupied. Think of your dog like someone studying for college exams, you cannot concentrate when there is too much going on. Once he starts to understand the new behavior you are shaping, practice in a different room in the house. Practice in every room indoors until your dog performs reliably then go to the *least* stimulating outside environment, such as the backyard (if that is now a boring environment to your dog). From there, *gradually* graduate to increasingly stimulating environments.

When starting new behaviors for agility, your body language becomes part of the behavior (and cue). You need to be aware of how you are standing, what your arms are doing, etc. Try to incorporate correct body language from the beginning.

Keep your body neutral when shaping new behaviors. Remember that dogs are very physically oriented and if you are leaning, bending, shifting, and pointing as they are learning a new behavior, then you may either short circuit the process (dog stops working and looks at you) or those physical actions will become part of the behavior you are teaching (such as pointing at a target).

COMMON QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

My dog is afraid of the clicker!

If you notice the dog is shying away from the click (the sound is unfamiliar and may frighten a stressed-out dog), you can either muffle the sound so that it is not as loud or discontinue the clicker session (if the dog seems to be very stressed, tail tucked, fearful body language, avoiding). Some ways of muffling the click are as follows:

- ◆ Hide the clicker behind your back
- ◆ Place the clicker in your pocket. Click from inside your pocket.
- ◆ Wrap the clicker in a small towel.
- ◆ OR just go ahead and use a verbal bridge instead of a clicker.

Why can't I use my voice instead of the clicker?

You can but just remember that the "click" is a very distinguishable sound. The click is non-emotional, has the same pitch and tone every time, and is different than other sounds in the environment. Voices vary widely from person to person. The click will stay the same no matter who uses the clicker. A verbal bridge can be used instead of a clicker once a behavior is shaped to accuracy.

Charging Your Clicker or Verbal Bridge

I have found it unnecessary to "charge" a verbal bridge or clicker. Most dogs catch on very quickly and you can start shaping behaviors almost right away.

It's Not a Remote Control

When using a clicker, do not point the clicker at your dog like a remote control. Also do not make any hand movements until after you have clicked. Put the clicker behind your back if you have a habit of moving it around as you work. You want your dog to focus on the sound, not you moving the clicker around or reaching for a treat before you have sounded the click.

“Training is simple, but it is not easy.”

–Bob Bailey

Don't be discouraged if your dog doesn't "get it." Training any species of animal is not simple. If you are frustrated or confused, videotape several training sessions and checking your timing, criteria, and rate of reinforcement. Finding a good local clicker training course is also of huge benefit, even if it is a "tricks" class.

WEBSITE WITH GOOD LINKS TO CLICKER TRAINING ARTICLES

http://www.k9events.com/clicker_Bob_Bailey.htm