

Training your dog:

Clicker Training

Shaping is the means by which a desired behaviour is developed gradually by rewarding any effort the animal makes towards the action you want to train. Animals (and people!) have an inbuilt tendency to repeat behaviours they find rewarding, so if for example you reward your dog with a titbit every time it sits naturally, you will soon find that the dog begins to sit more often in anticipation of a reward. When this starts to happen, you can begin to shape the behaviour by rewarding only the parts of the behaviour which really impress you, for example, you could just reward the dog when it sits facing a certain way, or selectively reward quick, smart sits, ignoring slow, sloppy ones. When the dog is consistently offering the behaviour you want, you can then add a command as the dog sits, followed by a reward, and the dog will learn to sit on command.

Primary & Secondary Reinforcement

A **primary reinforcement** is anything the dog finds rewarding. This might be a tasty titbit (cubes of cheese, diced liver, chopped chicken or sausage for example), or a game with a toy, or patting and physical fuss - in fact anything that the dog would enjoy anyway, without training.

Secondary reinforcement is something that occurs with or immediately before the reward that the dog learns to associate with it. The dog eventually finds the secondary reinforcer a reward in itself, no longer relying on the primary reinforcer. A secondary reinforcer could be praise, or a distinctive sound that the dog hears.

The Clicker

The clicker, used as a Secondary reinforcement becomes a very powerful aid to training. It is a quick and very distinctive sound which signals to the dog that a reward is coming. It is much quicker to click than to say "Good dog" so your timing, which is essentially for this type of training, can be precise. The clicker sound precedes the reward, and becomes a signal to the dog that it is doing what you want at EXACTLY the moment the action occurs.

Getting started

Initially, the dog must learn that the clicker means something nice is about to happen. To start with, click and treat several times so the dog gets used to the sound and begins to associate it with the reward. Sound the clicker just before you put the dog's food bowl down - this rewards the dog for coming to you! You can use the click-reward sequence every time the dog does something you want.

Pure shaping is done by watching for an action and rewarding it. However, for most training purposes, this would take a very long time, as you would have to wait for the dog to do something before you could reward it. In practice, it is easier to arrange for the dog to do what you want and then reward. Ideally, this should (and can) be done without touching the dog.

'SIT'

Have the clicker in one hand, and a treat in the other. Hold the treat in front of the dog's nose till his attention is focused on your hand. Then move your hand above the dog's head and backwards, so he has to lift his head to see it. Most dogs will sit automatically in this position -

as he does so, click, then give him the reward. If the dog walks backwards, try doing it in a corner; if he jumps up your hand is probably too high. Ignore every wrong move - the dog is learning by trial and error what will be rewarded. Each time he sits, click and reward. Gradually reduce the hand movement until he will sit in anticipation without seeing the reward.

When you get to the point where you can accurately predict when he will sit, say "Sit" as he moves into position. Click and reward. You are now "putting the behaviour on cue".

Now you need to reward the dog intermittently, rather than every time, so that you can gradually wean him off the need to be rewarded every time. When he has sat, encourage him off the spot and ask him to do it again. Click for 2 sits on some occasions rather than one. The dog will actually start to work harder for you to get you to click!

'DOWN'

This can be trained in the same way as the sit, by luring the dog down with a titbit in your hand. Initially, click on any downward movement the dog makes rather than expecting him to go right down at once. Then you can click every time he gets closer to the floor.

'COME'

Call the dog's name; when he turns, click and throw him the reward. Next time, click when he takes a couple of steps towards you. Call him a short distance, click and reward when he gets to you. Gradually increase the distance. Keep him guessing - sometimes click as he turns, sometimes as he gets to you, and sometimes when he is half way there.

'STAY'

When the dog will sit and lie down instantly, gradually increase the time he will stay by counting a few seconds before you click. It doesn't matter if he gets up to get the reward - the click signals the end of the exercise.

'WALKING TO HEEL'

This can be done on or off lead, the important thing to remember being that the lead should be slack at all times and NOT used in any way for correction. Start with the dog on your left, lead (if using) and clicker in your left hand and titbits accessible in a right hand pocket or belt bag. Walk forwards. When your dog is level with you, click, stop and reward. Walk forwards again. Keep changing direction - if the dog is ahead of you, about turn - click and reward as he catches up. Gradually he will learn that staying close to you gets results. You can then shape him closer to you by asking for increasing accuracy, and add a "heel" command as he comes into the correct position. Clicker training is magic if you want to teach competition style "close" heelwork!

Keep training sessions short and fun, stopping before the dog begins to tire. Alternate between different exercises to keep him interested. Take the clicker and some titbits or a toy with you when you go out - use shaping to get the dog to come to you by rewarding him when he does it naturally (don't use the command "Come" until you are sure you have an instant response to it when training at home).

Tricks to try:

Shake hands.

Wave Goodbye.

"Gimme five!"

Roll over.

Crawl on your tummy.

"Speak!"

Sit up and beg.

"Bang!"

Play dead

Play football

(initially need to teach dog to "touch" a held ball, then reward increasing efforts to push it along the floor; eventually teach dog to push ball past goal posts).

Jump through a hoop (or through arms, over owner's leg etc).

Fetch the papers (your bowl, your lead, Dad's slippers etc).

Close the door (very useful!)

'Put your toys away'.

And why not invent your own!

Suggested further reading:

Go Click! An Introduction to Clicker Training Elizabeth Kershaw (Available from the surgery)

Reinforcement Training For Dogs - John Fisher

Don't Shoot The Dog - Karen Pryor

A Dog and a Dolphin - Karen Pryor

Clicker training is fun, and a great way to teach your dog to do all sorts of tricks. If you click and reward small movements in the right direction you can train your dog (or any other animal for that matter) to do anything that it is physically possible for that animal to do. Have fun experimenting!

This information has been compiled by Sarah Coton, Head Veterinary Nurse and Canine Behaviour Consultant at our Warwick centre. Further advice is available by appointment.