

Fifteen Rules for Getting Started with the Clicker

Clicker training is a new, science-based way to communicate with your pet. It's easier to learn than standard command-based training. You can clicker train any kind of dog, of any age. Puppies love it. Old dogs learn new tricks. You can clicker-train cats, birds, and other pets as well. Don't worry, at first, about getting rid of behavior you don't like. Instead, start with some good things you want the dog to learn to do. Keep notes (the refrigerator door is a good place.) Jot down what the dog was doing when you started. Once a day or so, jot down what you have achieved with each behavior. You will be surprised at the progress! Reward YOURSELF for the dog's improvements. Here are some simple tips to get you started.

1. Push and release the springy end of the clicker, making a two-toned click. Then treat. Keep the treats small. Use a delicious treat at first: little cubes of roast chicken, say--not a lump of kibble.
2. Click DURING the desired behavior, not after it is completed. The timing of the click is crucial. Don't be dismayed if your pet stops the behavior when it hears the click. The click ends the behavior. Give the treat after that; the timing of the treat is not important.
3. Click when the dog does something you like. Choose something easy at first, which the dog is likely to do on its own. (Ideas: sit; come toward you; touch your hand with its nose; raise a paw; go through a door; walk next to you.)
4. Click once (in-out.) If you want to express special enthusiasm, increase the number of treats, not the number of clicks.
5. Keep practice sessions short. Much more is learned in three sessions of five minutes each than in an hour of boring repetition. You can get noticeable results, and teach your dog many new things, by fitting a few clicks a day here and there in your normal routine.
6. Fix bad behavior by clicking good behavior. Click the puppy for relieving itself in the proper spot. Click for paws on the ground, not on the visitors. Instead of scolding for barking, click for silence. Cure leash pulling by clicking and treating those moments when the leash happens to go slack.
7. Click for voluntary (or accidental) movements toward your goal. You may coax or lure the dog into a movement or position, but don't push, pull, or hold it. Work without a leash. If you need a leash for safety's sake, loop the leash over your arm or through your belt; don't use it as a tool.

8. Don't wait for the "whole picture" or the perfect behavior. Click and treat for small movements in the right direction. You want the dog to sit, and it starts to crouch in back: click. You want it to come when called, and it takes a few steps your way: click.

9. Keep raising your goal. As soon as you have a good response—when the dog is voluntarily lying down, coming toward you, or sitting repeatedly—start asking for more. Wait a few beats, until the dog stays down a little longer, comes a little further, sits a little faster. Then click. This is called "shaping" a behavior.

10. When the dog has learned to do something for clicks, it will begin showing you the behavior spontaneously, trying to get you to click. Now is the time to begin offering a cue, such as a word or a hand signal. Start clicking for that behavior if it happens during or after the cue. Start ignoring that behavior when the cue wasn't given.

11. Don't order the dog around; clicker training is not command-based. If your dog does not respond to a cue, it is not "disobeying;" it just hasn't learned the cue completely. Find more ways to cue it and click it for the desired behavior, in easier circumstances.

12. Carry a clicker and "catch" cute behaviors like cocking the head, chasing the tail, or holding up one paw. You can click for many different behaviors, whenever you happen to notice them, without confusing your dog. If you have more than one dog, separate them for training, and let them take turns.

13. If you get mad, put the clicker away. Don't mix scolding, leash-jerking, and correction training with clicker training; you will lose the dog's confidence in the clicker and perhaps in you.

14. If you are not making progress with a particular behavior, you are probably clicking too late. Accurate timing is important. Get someone else to watch you, and perhaps to click for you, a few times.

15. Above all, have fun. Clicker-training is a wonderful way to enrich your relationship with your dog.

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