

Operant Conditioning with a Clicker

Operant conditioning involves taking something that has **no meaning** to the dog (like the word, “Good!” or “Yes!” or the sound of a clicker) and pairing it with something that has intrinsic **value** to the dog (like food, play, or some other reward), to create an association between the two, which will be used to teach “on-cue” behaviors (cue responses) to the animal.

The food is called a “**primary reinforcer**” because the dog will work to get it--it is intrinsically valuable on its own. After the click sound becomes paired with the primary reinforcer, the click itself becomes reinforcing to the dog. It tells the dog, “Marvelous! You just earned a treat!” We call this click a “bridge” or a “**secondary reinforcer**”. The click “bridges” the gap in time between the moment the behavior was marked as correct and the delivery of the primary reinforcer. The dog will now work very hard to try to earn “clicks”, as they predict rewards.

STEP ONE

To begin, take a whole pile of tiny treats (about pea size) and sit with the dog. **Click** the clicker and give a **treat**. Click the clicker and give a treat. Click the clicker and give a treat. Do this till you’ve used up the pile of treats (40 to 100 clicks and treats). Remember to use tiny treats--you’re going to be using them regularly. Just give enough to give him a taste of what you have without filling the dog too quickly or having to wait for him to chew a large treat.

After you have completed the above exercise, your dog should start perking up at the sound of the click. Keep the treats hidden in a hand or on the table in a bag, or between your crossed legs, or whatever. The only expectation he has of getting the treat is by hearing the click first.

We don’t want him to associate getting the treat with seeing the treat--we want him to associate getting the treat with hearing the click.

Now, when the dog perks at the sound of the click, he recognizes it as a secondary reinforcer (a predictor of good things to come). When he is doing something, and he hears that click, his brain will instantly file that information, and he will work to **repeat** the behavior which he was performing at the instant he heard the click. Now, you have the power of the Universe in your hand!

STEP TWO

When you catch the dog performing a behavior you want to see repeated (a good behavior), then click and give the treat. Let’s say you want to teach the dog to sit. You could lure the dog with food, or wait for him to sit on his own. The instant his cute little butt plops on the floor, you click, and then give him his treat. It doesn’t matter if you are a half-second late delivering the treat--it’s the **click** that is telling him to choose THAT behavior among all of the others he might have been doing in the last minute (like walking, turning, breathing, barking, straining at the leash, pawing you, sniffing the floor...).

Timing is **critical**. If you are late, don’t click. You snooze, you LOSE! You have lost the opportunity to reward THAT SIT forever. Don’t panic. There will be more sits. Just be careful to reward them when they happen. If you click too late, and the dog is already switching behaviors to something else (like getting up, lying down, sniffing, barking, etc...) then you will be rewarding that other behavior, and NOT the sit! Be careful! Novices need practice developing their timing.

Studies have shown that novice dog trainers:

A. DO NOT GIVE ENOUGH FEEDBACK to their dogs.

They are either daydreaming, doing an impersonation of a “post”, or not anticipating their dog’s behaviors, so that they are ready to give FEEDBACK information to the dog when he deserves a reward. Feedback can be a click to end the behavior or words of encouragement to maintain a behavior that is correct, but needs to be held for a few or more seconds.

B. ARE TYPICALLY “THREE BEHAVIORS LATE” delivering a reinforcement

They are either daydreaming, doing an impersonation of a “post”, or not anticipating their dog’s behaviors, so that they are ready to give FEEDBACK information to the dog when he deserves a reward.

C. CANNOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHAT TO REWARD AND WHAT NOT TO REWARD

They don’t have a picture in their mind of what to expect. They don’t know a good behavior when they see one. Their expectations are far too high, and they do not settle for an “approximation” of the behavior they are looking for.

This will help:

Don’t Daydream! Pay attention to your dog. How else can you avoid missing that all-important first attempt at the desired behavior, so that you can reward it? Think of the click as a camera shutter. Be ready to take the prize winning photo of the dog doing the behavior you want!

Don’t Be a Post! If you stand there like a tree, which your dog is tied to, and don’t give any feedback to your dog, you are like a post! When a dog is tied to a post he gets something we call “barrier frustration.” He’s tied there, nothing’s happening, he wants to be somewhere else, he starts to dig, bark and pull at the end of the leash. You are NOTHING to the dog but an annoying anchor-point. **YOU** are making him disinterested in you! Don’t blame the class environment for “distracting” him! If he has not given you a behavior that you want to click (give feedback) in the last minute or so and you lose the dog’s attention, then help him give you a good behavior by luring or by asking him to do a behavior he already has on cue.

Be a TRAINER! Anticipate the dog’s moves and be ready to reward them. If he even **glances** at you for one millisecond, **reward** him **instantly** (click, praise, whatever you can deliver quickly). If he sits and looks up at you, well, holy cow, give him a jackpot! But don’t expect a more advanced behavior like sitting looking up at you in the beginning. **Reward** that **first** glint of **eye contact**, and soon you will have a dog that is ignoring the floor and the other dogs and is sitting there looking at you. You are the Goddess of all that is wonderful! Treats and praise flow forth from you like magic. Suddenly, you have become more interesting than the floor!

Using a clicker has many advantages over using a verbal reinforcement marker (like saying “yes” or “good” when the dog gets it right):

1. There is no tonal inflection in the click, as there is with a voice. It sounds the same every time. Therefore, each member of the family can use it, and it will sound the same. Also, you can never make it sound “emotional” if you are upset, angry, or a “lousy praiser.”
2. Men (and inhibited, or shy women and children) can use it without feeling stupid. We no longer have to browbeat the men in class to get them to fork up some excited praise for their dog! This is not meant to “bash” men--I realize that they are socialized completely differently from women, and aren’t prone to gushy, appreciative remarks, bursts of joyful adoration, or giddy excitement at seemingly small accomplishments (that’s what we women are here for!).

3. It is instantaneous. A click only takes a quarter of a second, so you can mark a behavior that is occurring amidst an onslaught of rapid-fire behaviors being offered by the dog. If you took the time to say, “Gooooood Dogggggg!” The dog would wonder which one of the 18 behaviors he offered during that time span actually earned him the treat!

4. Once conditioned to the click as a reinforcer system, the dog will actually work harder to earn the click (secondary reinforcer) than he did to earn the treat with no click (primary reinforcer).

Some rules for training with a clicker:

1. Never let a young child (or an adult idiot) get his hands on the clicker. In one afternoon, he could extinguish all of the work you have done! “Extinguishing” is taking a behavior and pairing it with nothing (no reward) until the animal doesn’t offer the behavior any more.
2. Don’t click the clicker close to your ear or the dog’s ear. The sound is quite loud at close range.
3. Always follow the click with a treat. Treat can mean food, play, or anything that is rewarding to the dog.
4. Make sure you have established the clicker as a reward (create a reward history) before you use it to reinforce the behaviors you are learning in class. It’s the same with the click, or the word “Good” or whatever you use. If the dog doesn’t understand that it means, it will have NO REINFORCING VALUE.
5. Remember, when you start shaping a behavior, THE QUALITY GOES IN BEFORE THE NAME GOES ON! Don’t NAME the behavior (give it a cue word) until you have been getting the behavior regularly and click and treating it for a while. When that behavior becomes the dog’s “favorite,” then you can name it. You will know this when he sees you take out the clicker and treats for training and he starts doing the “watch me sit!” thing. Then, and only then is it safe to name the behavior (“SIT”).

CUES

Cues are the names of the behaviors you want your dog to produce (on cue). We used to call them commands, but that sounded too controlling and authoritative.

We also want to think of cues a little differently than commands. A cue is an OPPORTUNITY for the dog to earn something--attention, treats, or play. The dog sees it as just that. He can’t wait to “obey” a cue. A command has sort of an “or else” connotation to it. Operant conditioning works best when NOT paired with any aversives (negative consequences). So, to maximize your training efforts, do not throw punishments and corrections into the equation. The only punishment for the dog is a NON-REWARD. If a no-reward situation does not affect your dog, then your reward needs to be more powerful. If I gave out stickers to people who were on time for class, and you were late, you’d say “Ah No Big Deal!” Right? What if you found out I had given out hundred dollar bills to everyone who was on time, and you were late? DARN! You’d be a little upset, right?

We want you to use a **NO-REWARD marker**, or “conditioned punisher”. This tells the dog,

“I’m not ‘paying’ you for that behavior!” A no-reward marker can be chosen from the following list:

Wrong Try again Oops Ah ah! Too Bad! Sorry

This has to be taught to the dog, just like the secondary reinforcer does. He has to learn that this specific word means, “Sorry,--No Treat!” Use this word when you withhold a reward from your dog. He hears the no-reward marker and he sees the reward leaving and going out of reach. He’s thinking, “Darn! I blew it.” Then when your dog is exhibiting a behavior you don’t want, you can let him know it’s no good by giving him the no-reward marker. I suggest you don’t use “NO” for this. First of all, “NO” is a swearword for dogs (in my book). Second of all, people tend to use it for EVERYTHING, which is inappropriate. And thirdly, the word NO conveys no information (you could usually substitute a cue, which DOES convey information to get a dog to stop a behavior you don’t like).

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