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[Home](#) > Clicker Training Your Pet

## Clicker Training Your Pet



### What Is Clicker Training?

Clicker training is a method of animal training that uses a sound—a click—to tell an animal when he does something right. The clicker is a tiny plastic box held in the palm of your hand, with a metal tongue that you push quickly to make the sound. Most people who've heard of the clicker know that it's a popular tool for dog trainers, but clickers can be used to train all kinds of animals, wild and domestic—from lions to elephants to household cats, birds and rats!

### How Does the Clicker Work?

The clicker creates an efficient language between a human trainer and an animal trainee. First, a trainer teaches an animal that every time he hears the clicking sound, he gets a treat. Once the animal understands that clicks are always followed by treats, the click becomes as powerful a reward to the animal as money is to people. When this happens, the trainer can use the click to mark (identify for the animal) the instant the animal performs the right behavior. For example, if a trainer wants to teach a dog to sit, she'll click the instant his rump hits the floor and then deliver a tasty treat. With repetition, the dog learns that sitting earns rewards.

So the click takes on huge meaning. To the animal it means: "What I was doing the moment my trainer clicked, *that's* what she wants me to do!" The clicker in animal training is like the winning buzzer on a game show that tells a contestant she just won money! Through the clicker, the trainer communicates precisely with the dog, and that speeds up training.

Although the clicker is ideal because it makes a unique, consistent sound, you do need a spare hand to hold it. For that reason, some trainers prefer to keep both hands free and instead use a

one-syllable word like “Yes!” or “Good!” to mark the desired behavior. In the steps below, you can substitute the word in place of the click to teach your pet what the sound means, just as you would with a clicker.

### Giving the Clicker Meaning

It's easy to introduce the clicker to your pet. Spend 30 minutes or so teaching him that the sound of the click means “Treat!” (For the sake of simplicity, let's assume that you're going to clicker train a dog.)

1. Sit and watch TV or read a book with your dog in the room. Have a container of treats within reach.
2. Place one treat in your hand and the clicker in the other. (If your dog smells the treat and tries to get it by pawing, sniffing, mouthing or barking at you, just close your hand around the treat and wait until he gives up and leaves you alone.)
3. Click once and immediately open your hand to give your dog the treat. Put another treat in your closed hand and resume watching TV or reading. Ignore your dog.
4. Several minutes later, click again and offer another treat.
5. Continue to repeat the click-and-treat combination at varying intervals, sometimes after one minute, sometimes after five minutes. Make sure you vary the time so that your dog doesn't know exactly when the next click is coming. Eventually, he'll start to turn toward you and look expectant when he hears the click—which means he understands that the sound of the clicker means a treat is coming his way.

### Troubleshooting

If your pet runs away when he hears the click, you can make the sound softer by putting it in your pocket or wrapping a towel around your hand that's holding the clicker. You can also try using a different sound, like the click of a retractable pen or the word “Yes” or “Bingo.”

### Clicker Training Basics

Once your dog seems to understand the connection between the click and the treat, you're ready to get started. Keep these guidelines in mind to ensure your clicker training success:

1. Click just once, right when your pet does what you want him to do. Think of it like pressing the shutter of a camera to take a picture of the behavior.
2. Remember to follow every click with a treat. After you click, deliver the treat to your pet's mouth as quickly as possible.
3. It's fine to switch between practicing two or three behaviors within a session, but work on one behavior at a time. For example, say you're teaching a dog to sit, lie down and raise his paw. You can do 10 repetitions of sit and take a quick play break. Then do 10 repetitions of down, and take another quick break. Then do 10 repetitions of shake, and so on.
4. Animals, like children, have short attention spans. Keep training sessions short (15 minutes or less), and stop before you or your pet gets tired of the game.
5. End training sessions on a good note, when your pet has succeeded with what you're working on. If necessary, ask him to do something you know he can do well at the end of a session.

6. Some trainers like to click and then deliver a “jackpot”—a bunch of treats—when their pet has accomplished a particularly challenging task. Big efforts deserve big rewards!

### Three Ways to Get Behavior

To click and reward a behavior you like, you first need to find a way to get your animal to do that behavior. Clicker trainers usually use three ways to accomplish this: catching, shaping and luring. Before starting a training session, decide which method will work best for the behavior you want, and then take a few moments to think through the steps you’ll take to get accomplish your goal.

#### Catching

“Catching” means that you catch your pet in the act of doing the behavior you want. It’s the perfect method for training behaviors that your pet already does on his own, like sitting, lying down and maybe rolling over on grass. For example, if you want to train your dog to lie down, you can stand in your living room with your dog and just wait. After a little while, your dog will probably decide to lie down and get comfortable. The instant his body hits the floor, click and toss a treat on the ground a few feet in front of him. He’ll have to stand up to take the treat, so after he eats it you’ll be ready to start over again. Continue the sequence of waiting for your dog to lie down on his own, and then clicking and tossing a treat the moment he does. With repetition, your dog will eventually look at you and throw himself to the ground to earn his treat.

#### Shaping

With “shaping,” you gradually build a new behavior by clicking and rewarding a series of small steps toward it. Shaping is a good method for training new behaviors (or a series of behaviors called a “chain”) that your pet doesn’t already do on his own naturally—like raising a paw in the air, retrieving a ball or going to a specific spot to lie down. You start by rewarding the first small behavior that begins your pet on his journey toward the complete behavior. When he’s mastered that first step, you ask a little more of him—require him to do the *next* small step to earn his click and treat. For example, to get a dog to raise his paw, you might start by clicking and treating when he shifts his weight off one paw slightly. Once he’s shifting his weight smoothly over several repetitions, you delay clicking until you see him lift his front paw off the floor just one inch. When he’s good at tiny paw raises, delay your click again and require him to raise his paw another inch or two higher to earn his click and treat. By reinforcing each tiny step as if it were the ultimate goal, your dog will think that learning is fun and will soon be performing the goal behavior with enthusiasm.

#### Luring

“Luring” involves using a treat like a magnet or guide to get your pet into a desired position. The food lure (a small piece of tasty food) is held right in front of your pet’s nose and then moved while he follows it. For example, to lure a dog into a down position, hold a piece of food in front of his nose and then slowly draw it straight down in front of his chest to the floor. The food will work like a magnet, drawing your dog’s nose and then his body downward. As his elbows touch the floor, click and treat for the down. After some practice, you can just use the hand motion to prompt your dog to lie down. Make the same movement as before, but with no treat in your hand. Over many repetitions, you can gradually make this hand signal smaller and shorter. Eventually,

your dog will lie down when you point to the ground. Lure-and-reward training is often quicker and more efficient than catching or shaping to get and reward certain behaviors.

## Adding the Cue

Whether you've used catching, shaping or luring to get a behavior you want, your next step is to add a cue or command. If you've used luring, you'll know you're ready when your pet consistently does the behavior you want as soon as you give your hand signal. If you've used catching or shaping, you can add the cue when your pet is confidently offering the behavior over and over, without any other behaviors in between.

1. First say the cue word you'd like to use. (Say it only once—don't nag!)
2. Then ask or wait for the behavior. (Use your hand signal to prompt your pet if you were luring. If you used catching or shaping, you'll just wait after you give the cue for your pet to offer the behavior.)
3. Click and treat the instant your pet performs the behavior.

Good timing is essential. Be sure to say your cue *before* your pet does the behavior you want, not at the same time. If you practice the steps above in order, your pet will eventually learn what the cue means.

## Final Tips

- After you add the cue, don't reward the behavior anymore unless you first give the cue.
- Practice a new behavior in many different places so that your pet learns how to do it everywhere. Start in calm, quiet environments and slowly work up to more distracting locations.
- After you've practiced a new behavior in several different places and your pet reliably responds to your cue, you can begin to cut back on rewards for that behavior. Reward only the best responses (like the highest paw raise), or reward the behavior under the most difficult or distracting conditions. You can also reward just because you haven't rewarded that behavior in a little while. Start using a variety of rewards, like your pet's dinner, access to outdoors, games, toys, access to playmates—anything your pet loves can be used as a reward!
- Clicker training should be enjoyable for both trainer and trainee. Don't train if you're in a bad mood, distracted or don't have time to finish a session. Keep sessions short and upbeat. You'll be amazed at what a terrific student your pet is.
- To learn more about training your pet, please see our articles, [Training Your Dog](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and [Training Your Cat](#) <sup>[2]</sup>. To learn more about clicker training, you can look for books and videos on the subject online or at your local bookstore. Here are some of our favorites:
  - *Click for Joy* by Melissa Alexander
  - *Clicker Fun* by Deborah Jones, PhD
  - *Don't Shoot the Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training* by Karen Pryor
  - *Take a Bow-Wow* (multiple videos) by Virginia Broitman and Sherri Lippman
  - *Clicker Magic DVD* by Karen Pryor
- If you have a dog, check out clicker training class for him. Many Certified Professional Dog Trainers (CPDTs) offer group and private lessons. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, to locate a CPDT in your area.

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Cat Behavior - Training and Playing <sup>[4]</sup>

Dog Behavior - Training Your Dog <sup>[5]</sup>

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/training-your-dog>

[2] <http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-behavior/training-your-cat>

[3] <http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/finding-professional-help>

[4] <http://www.aspca.org/taxonomy/term/373>

[5] <http://www.aspca.org/taxonomy/term/364>