

The easiest way to start clicker training is to teach your dog to hand target. During this process your dog will learn that the click sound always means a treat is coming, and he'll learn that offering a specific behavior earns a click/treat. This will become the foundation for teaching all sorts of new behaviors.

What You Need

- A clicker – these can be purchased at most pet stores or online
- Tasty, soft, bite-sized treats – try hot dogs, cheese, chicken, or beef cut into 1/4-inch cubes. Place about 15-20 treats in a small bowl
- A quiet place with no distractions that has a table or counter on which you can place the treat bowl so that it is too high for the dog to reach.

“Charging” the Clicker

Click and give your dog a treat from the bowl on the table. Do not reach toward the bowl until you have clicked. Do this about 10 times. Make sure the dog is in different positions when he hears the click (sitting, standing, facing you from the front, facing you from the side, etc.). Repeat this session two times.

To test whether the dog understands that click=treat, wait until he is interested in something (not you) and click. If he turns to you looking for a treat, you know he's got the click/treat association. Now you're ready to start using the clicker to mark behaviors that you want the dog to do.

Teaching Target

With your treats close by and your clicker in one hand, put your free hand an inch or two directly in front of your dog's nose. Your hand should be open and flat, palm out. When the dog sniffs your hand, click and treat. You can feed the treat directly to the dog or throw it on the floor – make sure he sees it. Remove your target hand (put it behind your back) as you click and treat. Repeat this about three times.

On the fourth time, move your hand a little to one side; on the next time, move your hand a little to the other side. Always click and treat when the dog touches your hand with his nose. Be sure that you are not moving your hand into his nose.

Now present your hand a little higher, then a little lower, then a little further away from his nose (six inches). Always click and treat when the dog touches your hand with his nose. Next, present your hand a little further away so that your dog must take a step or two to get to it. If he doesn't move, move your body around a little to see if you can get him up and moving (some dogs get stuck in the “sit” position if they have been rewarded for this in the past). Do this “moving” touch three or four times, then end your training session. End your training session with a verbal cue, such as “all done.” It's often nice to end a training session with some petting, some play, or a walk.

Tips

- Keep the game moving and fun – your 15-20 clicks should happen in the space of two to three minutes.
- Try to avoid bending at the waist while training. Bend at the knees so that you are not looming over the dog.
- With a small dog it may be best to work on your knees, or alternatively, to put the dog up on a bench or table.

- End the session before your dog does, but if he loses interest before you stop, end the session and come back a little later. Sometimes dogs need a little time to process the new thing they are learning, so don't get discouraged by this.
- If you can, do three to four of these short sessions a day. If you can only do one, that's okay too. Your dog will remember what he learned and make progress either way.
- Remember click always means treat, so even if you make a mistake and click in error, he must receive a treat.

Moving On

- A good way to be sure your dog understands this behavior is to hold your hand high enough that he must lift his front feet off the floor to touch it. Once he offers this behavior, you can be fairly sure he understands what you want him to do.
- Adding a verbal cue – for this particular behavior, the cue is putting your hand out. No verbal cue is needed, but we humans like verbal cues, so if you want to add one, here's how. Once the dog is offering the behavior as soon as he sees your hand, start saying the cue word "touch" as he touches his nose to your hand. This way he is associating the word with his action. Do this for about two training sessions. In the next training session, say "touch" just before his nose touches your hand. Then, in subsequent sessions, say "touch" as you offer your hand. Now you have a verbal cue!
- Variable Schedule of Reinforcement – you have been using a "continuous schedule of reinforcement" which means the dog gets a treat every time he performs the behavior. Now you're ready to move to a variable schedule of reinforcement, meaning he only gets a treat sometimes. Only click and treat every third, sixth, second, fourth, or tenth time he performs the behavior.
- Where to put the darn treats – if you started with the treats in a bowl, and now you're doing this behavior in other locations, you probably have already run into the problem of where to keep your treats. It's handy to buy a treat pouch that you wear at your waist; this can be a bag made specifically for dog training or just a fanny pack. A carpenter's apron works well as does any kitchen apron with pockets.
- Once your dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue (i.e., he will do the behavior when you give the verbal cue at least 90% of the time) on a variable schedule of reinforcement, you don't really need the clicker any more for that behavior. You should still reward your dog often with praise and variably with a food treat, but you don't need the clicker any more--until you're ready to teach a new behavior!

Puppy Nipping: Touch is also a good alternative, incompatible behavior for puppy nipping. When your pup is inclined to mouth you, ask for the "touch" behavior. This gives him something else to do instead of nipping at you.

Tips

- When introducing a new behavior, go back to a continuous schedule of reinforcement.
- Lower the value of your treats – as your dog starts to enjoy the clicker game, you may find you can use lower value treats (like kibble); save higher value treats for more difficult situations or for jackpots.
- Remember to reduce your dog's meal size for the amount of treats you are feeding during training.