

WHAT IS CLICKER TRAINING ALL ABOUT? AND DOES IT WORK BETTER THAN OTHER TYPES OF TRAINING?

Clicker training is a system that uses a hand-held plastic/metal device that makes a clicking noise when you press it. This system most commonly includes the use of food motivation. When the dog does what you want it to, you press the clicker once to “mark” the behaviour and immediately give the dog a food reward. The dog then associates the completed command or task with the sound of the clicker and food. Eventually, the dog will respond to the “reward” of the click alone. It is a form of operant conditioning and is used by some trainers to teach obedience, focus for agility training, or acting tricks on the movie set. A verbal marker (“Yes!”) can be used instead of a click, but many trainers prefer an actual clicker as the sound is so distinctive and immediate.

Clickers can also be a great asset for people with physical disabilities who can’t use their arms for hand signals or their voices for verbal commands. In these cases, clickers can be used to communicate with the dog using various combinations of clicks (for example, by clicking twice for a recall, once for a sit, etc.), similar to dogs who are trained in sheep or cattle herding and whose guidance comes from various whistles from their handlers. This application is rare and classified as a special need, and requires extensive training by a professional who understands the disability and uses a training system without fear or intimidation.

When I’m asked the question, “Does clicker training work better than other types of training?” my response as an educator is that *any form of training works only as well as the amount of time and effort put into practicing it*. Ask other trainers what they think is the best system and they will probably tell you that whatever they are using is best – which, of course, is why they are using it. If what they say makes sense to you, give it a try. If you make a decision and then don’t get the results that you want, try something else.

Choosing a trainer and training system is as important as choosing a tutor for your child, so take responsibility and so your research so that you can make an informed decision.

Consistency, timing and repetition are the key ingredients for the success of any chosen training style. What you must ask yourself is, “What are my needs and expectations, and what are the results that I can get from my dog with that system?” If you are drawn to the clicker-bait system, try a class and decide for yourself if it works for you and your particular dog. If you and your dog are having fun and getting the results you want, then you are on the right path to success. However if you choose to use clickers or bait, I recommend that they be used intermittently and for a probationary period only while you progress toward obtaining the desired results without them.

For safety reasons, I do not recommend that clicker and bait training be used to teach a basic obedience routine to your dog. If your dog is off leash and in a dangerous spot and you’ve lost your clicker or don’t have any more cookies and your dog won’t stay or recall without them..... You have an unsafe dog! If you have trained your dog only to respond to devices and

food, how will he respond to just verbal commands and hand signals when you urgently need him to?

Verbal commands, verbal praise, hand signals and neutral corrections are the most effective tools for progressively inducing co-operation from a dog. For one thing, most people always have their voice and body with them. It's best to aspire to achieving results in your basic obedience routine without the use of bait or devices, and reserve these just for tricks, specialty tasks and disability assistance.

I've never met a dog that I couldn't train without food or gimmicks, just people who don't know how.

Stephanie Prewitt
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