

Clicker Training

The Modern Way to Train Dogs

Clicker training is a method of training an animal using a clicker, a tool which makes a clicking sound when pressed, to mark particular desired behaviour. Clickers have been used to train whales, bears, lions and domestic dogs and cats, and even humans, though I hasten to add that I am yet to get breakfast in bed! This method of dog training uses positive reinforcement, is reward based and allows the subject to identify that a behaviour is sought and also how precise it needs to be. Only once behaviour is established and reliable is a cue e.g. a verbal command such as “stand” added to the click. Once the response transfers to the verbal command a click is no longer necessary. This method of training informs dogs or other animals of their success in a prompt and precise manner

About Clickers

Clicker training is a very effective way of managing a number of tasks in a calm and rational manner. The tasks range from simple training such as teaching the dog to walk or stay to more challenging and fun tasks such as working with sheep. The alternative to a clicker is the voice but if you can deliver an instruction or command consistently, with no variation in its definition, then the voice will suffice. Also one click can represent several bits of information to the dog, such as:

You like how calm they are

They are in a desired position such as stand or down

They are in a desired area e.g. the point of balance on sheep

They are going to receive a treat/reward

Your movement towards them is honourable and not controlling

Effectiveness of Clicker Training

How can a handler convey all of the above information to a young puppy that doesn't speak English fluently and in a split second? The difference between using a clicker and not using one is as vast as using a well-trained collie for work and not using one at all.

I primarily use a clicker with young dogs from approximately 8 weeks of age to 4 months until behaviour is strengthened and established.

We have routinely observed that puppies or dogs trained with clickers have been easy to train and their owners have found the methods to be both simple and effective. Furthermore, we have noticed that children embrace the idea of clicker training far more positively than do adults and anything that encourages children to train in a kind a positive manner can only be beneficial to the dog and subsequently their bonding with their trainer.

The use of clickers is incredibly successful and most of my dogs have been successful have begun their training in this way.

Negativity Towards Clickers

Some handlers who have not used clickers, but have preconceived ideas about them, appear to have negative views about using clickers or find the concept confusing. As is the case with many “new or alternative” methods of training it takes time to become proficient at using clickers and a great deal of patience is called for. Puppies or dogs cannot be rushed into achieving and only when they are allowed the time to learn and consolidate new information will the methods come to fruition. Remember puppies in particular have low attention spans and also undergo various development stages and hormonal changes. The handler who trains without expectation will put least pressure on his/her dog and achieve the greatest success.

I have heard many sheepdog handlers say about using treats: "how are you supposed to give treats when the dog is hundreds of yards away" The simple answer is you don't. If you trust your dog to be hundreds of yards away then you must be confident of getting a quick recall and have a good stop on them in the first place. In other words your communication with your puppy is both effective and successful. If, on the other hand it isn't, then a clicker will enable this to happen much quicker. Once behaviour is established then the spoken word or command takes over from the clicker and a clicker is no longer required.

Many handlers I work with often work with dogs at distance without being able to whistle. How can a handler communicate effectively if they cannot be heard. If they have not defined the words they speak, how can a handler expect to be understood. Some handlers shout when they are not heard and how can a puppy differentiate as to the reason for shouting. A clicker on the other hand enables a quiet voice to be used and enables the puppy to concentrate and focus much more.