

INTRODUCTION TO CLICKER TRAINING

Clicker training is a common form of positive reinforcement. It is a simple and effective training method.

A clicker is a very small hand held device that makes a click sound when it is activated. Clicker training also referred to as marker training is a form of classical conditioning or Pavlovian conditioning.

This form of conditioning first came about when famous Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov conducted a number of experiments on dogs in the late 1890s and early 1900s (explained at the end of this article).

The benefits of clicker training are many. These include:

1. The dog can clearly see when they have given you the desired behaviour by the timing of the click. It is a very accurate way to communicate with the dog.
2. The click becomes a shared language, therefore the dogs rate of learning improves significantly.
3. There is no emotion in the sound of a clicker, it is the same sterile sound every time as opposed to the trainers voice which carries emotion that can influence the dog.
4. The clicker can also be a 'switch conditioner'. A dog can be conditioned to the clicker while they are in a calm learning state. Once conditioned to the clicker, the sound of it can help the dog to revert back to that state.
5. Communication between the two species should be straightforward and the clicker allows for this.

We also refer to clicker training as marker training i.e. we mark the desired behaviour with a click and follow up straight away with a high value food reinforcer.

The dog learns to associate food with the sound of the clicker. This is done by delivering a food reward immediately after the click.

The clicker doesn't have to be used forever. Initially you are clicking and rewarding 100% of the time to create a strong highly reinforced behaviour.

Once the behaviour is established and sound you can start clicking and rewarding intermittently i.e. every two or three times that the behaviour is performed, slowly clicking more intermittently until the clicker is phased out of that behaviour.

Examples of when to use the clicker:

Sit: Ask your dog to sit. The moment the dog drops their back end into the sit position mark it with a click and then deliver the food reward to the dog.

Down: Ask your dog to go into the down position - as soon as the dogs chest touches the ground and they are in the down position mark it with a click and then reward.

Heel: Step off with the dog beside you on the lead. Give the 'heel' command. If the dog is pulling on the lead, turn and walk in the opposite direction and when the dog is back beside you on a soft lead click and reward.

We can teach many behaviours with the clicker, the examples are endless and you are limited by your imagination with what you can teach a dog through clicker training.

The food should be delivered immediately after the click as the reinforcement value of the food reward is higher if it is delivered as close to the click as possible.

I encourage my clients to think of food rewards as the dog working for their food which is what their ancestors have done for thousands of years.

Some of my clients withhold the dogs morning meal until training time - the dog then earns their meal through food rewards. I personally am a fan of this strategy as dogs were born to work and the mental and physical stimulation of earning their food mimics what they have instinctively always done.

The food reward that is used is also very important. Because we want our dogs to be engaged and in a peak learning state during training a highly palatable and tasty food reward is beneficial.

You only need a small food reward as we are generally clicking and rewarding many times and the dog is in effect taking on calories. A food reward that is soft is also ideal so that the dog can promptly consume it allowing us to immediately go to the next command or repetition that we are working on.

Ziwi food rewards fit the bill perfectly in all of these factors. I find that dogs flip for Ziwi rewards - they love them for all of the above reasons which is why I don't hesitate to recommend them to my clients and use them on my own dog.

Origins of clicker training.

Pavlov was originally concerned with conducting experiments relating to dogs salivation rates when food was placed in front of them. Soon after his experiment begun he realised that the sound of footsteps made by his assistants who were delivering the food to the dogs would trigger them to salivate before the food was delivered.

Pavlov realised that he had discovered an important scientific discovery - any sound or object associated with the food would trigger the salivation response.

Pavlov decided to further study this important discovery. He paired a neutral stimulus which was a metronome with the food. The metronome would click and food was immediately presented to the dogs.

After a period the sound of the metronome would trigger the dogs to salivate. They associated the metronome with food so the metronome had now become a conditioned stimulus and the response of salivating was now a conditioned response.

This is the exact same principle as clicker training.