# Clicker Training 101: Getting Started

Chances are you've heard of people using clickers as part of positive reinforcement training. But how does "clicker training" actually work?

The clicker is not a magical remote for training (as much as we wish that existed!). The purpose of the clicker is to offer a unique sound that marks the exact moment that the learner "gets it right," followed immediately by a reinforcer (reward) like a treat. In behavior, a marker signal like this is called a "bridging stimulus." Studies have shown that you can train using positive reinforcement without a bridging stimulus like a clicker, but that animals consistently learn faster and more efficiently when one is used. Some people use a verbal marker like the word "yes!" instead. <u>Essentially, it is a tool that allows you to CLEARLY tell your learner exactly what you want!</u>

## So how do they work?

For a clicker to be effective, **the reinforcer (reward) has to be engaging (high value enough to keep their interest), and must be delivered fairly promptly after <u>each</u> time the click occurs.** Many people will start off by "loading" the clicker to help build an animal's understanding of how it works by simply repeating "click/treat click/treat" for several repetitions without asking for a specific behavior. Once your learner looks up expectantly at the sound of the clicker, there are a few basic ways methods you can use.

## Capturing

This is our go-to! And often the first one we teach. Essentially you use your clicker like a camera. You wait for the animal to **offer a complete behavior *naturally*** (like a sit), then click and reinforce. For example you might wait for a dog to choose to sit, then click and toss a treat in such a way that they have to stand up to eat it (so they're ready to sit again!). Depending on the behavior, the process might start out slowly-- but if your learner is engaged, you'll be surprised at how quickly they figure out the game! You can reinforce any behavior that your learner offers naturally this way. But be careful what you click for—one time we accidentally reinforced yawning and got a kitten to yawn over 7 times in under a minute!

## Targeting

This skill is the foundation for a thousand fun and practical behaviors. Targeting involves clicking and reinforcing for your learner <u>touching some part of their body to a target</u>. This might mean touching their nose to your hand (basis of recall), touching their foot to a mat (basis of a station), or touching their rump or shoulder to a surface (basis of many cooperative care injection behaviors). Targeting is one of the most versatile behaviors you can teach! We love starting kittens learning high-fives this way.

## Luring

This involves using a lure (usually food) to *move* the animal into a position that would be difficult to capture, such as a "sit pretty," or jumping through a hoop. The idea is to lure the animal into position, click when they get there, then deliver the treat. The challenge with this method is that fading the lure can be tricky, and luring can remove a lot of the initiative that you see using techniques like capturing and shaping, which relies on the learner to do some of the mental legwork.

## Shaping

One of the trickiest, but by far the most exciting, rewarding, and fun. Shaping involves capturing tiny "pieces" of a behavior, and gradually shaping an animal towards that final desired behavior. An example might be teaching a spin. Start off by clicking every time the dog glances to the left. Then when they turn their head to the left. Then turn their head and shift their weight. Then shift their weight and lift their paw. Then turn their upper body. Then turn halfway around, etc., until you have the full behavior. It requires precise timing and an engaged learner, but that feeling of connection while training intricate or complex behaviors are well worth the effort!

Now that you have an idea of the basics, we hope we've piqued your curiosity to try clicker training for yourself!

For a deeper dive into the world of practical clicker training, check out https://www.clickertraining.com/