

In the first instalment of a new series, **Sue Williams** explains how to get started...

Clicker training is fast becoming a popular way to train dogs, and many people are already achieving great results. It can be used to teach all sorts of exercises to pet dogs, as well as top competition dogs.

I have successfully used this method to train pet dogs, help with problem dogs, and teach complex tasks to some of the country's top display dogs. In addition, I have used clicker training with many other species including reindeer, llamas, pigs, skunks, coatis and even a raccoon dog.

Although many people think of clicker training as something relatively new, the science behind the techniques and principles can be traced back to the work of Pavlov (1849-1936), who discovered classical conditioning, and B F Skinner (1904-1990), who discovered operant conditioning.

This three-part series will guide you through the process of clicker training, and explain how you too can achieve brilliant results with your dog.

Clicker training

THE BENEFITS OF CLICKER TRAINING

The fantastic thing about clicker training is that any dog – no matter what breed, size, age or personality – will adapt and can be taught successfully using this technique, regardless of any previous training.

Clicker training done correctly is simple, incredibly effective and, most importantly, fun for owner and dog. It works using the principles of positive conditioning, sometimes referred to as positive reinforcement.

You will find that by using a clicker correctly, you create a communication pathway between you and your dog which, in practical terms, means you can clearly and precisely mark the exact moment when he has done something you want – basically, it gives you the ability to speak 'dog'!

The power of using a clicker is that you can capture a precise action and relay that information back to the dog in a way he understands. It gives you the ability to be so specific about what you are rewarding that the dog is able to learn really quickly and is actively engaged in using his brain to learn a particular task.

You can also use this method to reward actions from a distance. For example, when your dog is 50m away and you recall him, you can click as he turns towards you in response to your command, signalling that he has earned a reward that he will receive when he returns to you. Without the clicker, or another conditioned marker, it would be impossible to relay that information the moment your dog responds.

Training tips

- ✓ Make sure you use high-value rewards.
- ✓ Keep each session short – five to 10 minutes is ample.
- ✓ Have regular, short sessions throughout the day.
- ✓ Timing is crucial – aim to click the exact moment your dog performs the right behaviour.
- ✓ If you click at the wrong time, don't worry; forget it and start again, concentrating on getting the timing right next time. It is important to give your dog the reward as it's your error, not his, and if you don't it will confuse him.
- ✓ Start teaching your dog in an environment with, ideally, little or no distractions. Once he has got the hang of it, move on to different locations, gradually upping the level of distraction.

CONDITIONING YOUR DOG

Before you use a clicker to train your dog, you must first condition him to the sound. He needs to understand that the click means he's done the right thing and, as a result, he will receive a reward.

Whether you use food, a toy or praise is up to you, but you need to offer something he really likes. This is particularly important when you first start; I find that tiny pieces of a high-value food – such as sausages, cheese and so on – tend to work really well with most dogs.

Stage 1

Click = reward

● Start in a place with minimal distractions – I often do this in the garden or lounge.

● Click the clicker and immediately drop a treat on the floor for your dog; do this eight to 10 times.

● Repeat the procedure a few times in different locations until he associates the click with receiving the treat.

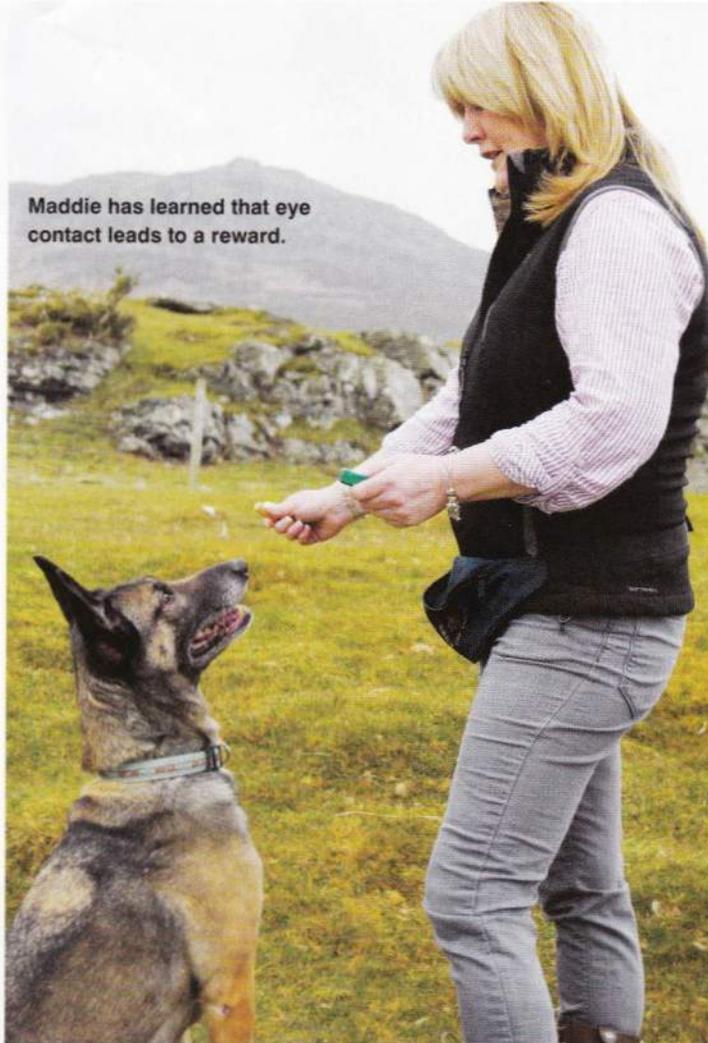
To test whether or not he is conditioned, click and withhold the treat; if he looks expectantly you are ready to move on to stage 2.

Stage 2

Right action = click = reward

Next, you need to teach your dog that he has to do the right thing in order to get a 'click' and receive the treat. To use the scientific term, we are turning the sound of the click ➤

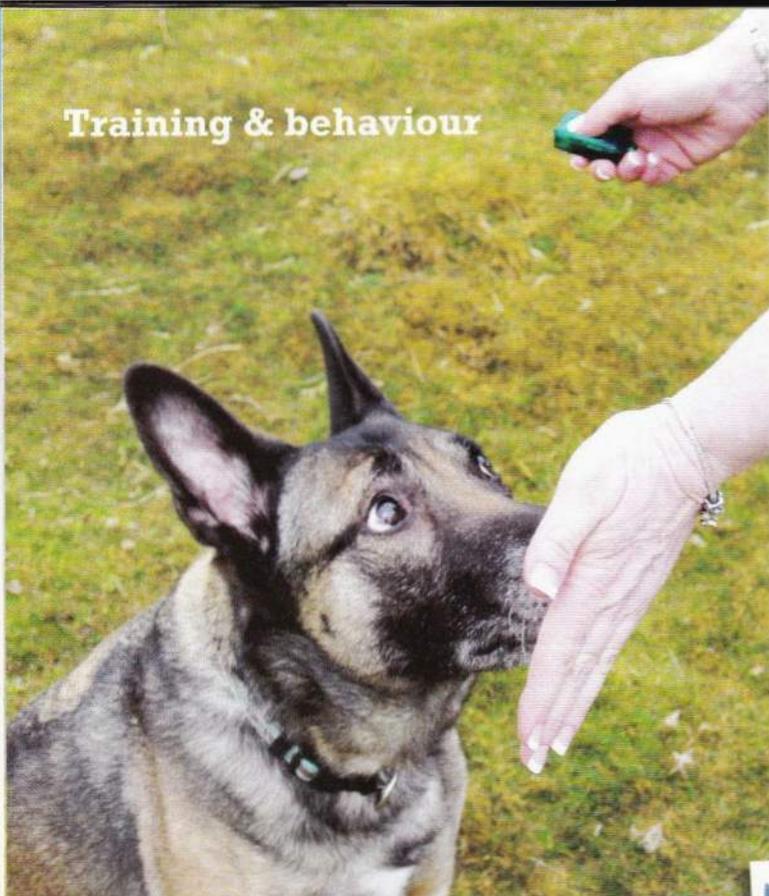
Maddie has learned that eye contact leads to a reward.



High-value rewards are needed, especially during early training.

Where to buy?

Clickers cost around £2 from pet shops.



As Maddie touches Sue's palm, Sue clicks and rewards.

into a conditioned reinforcer. We are teaching the dog to use his brain and work out what is required. This is where many people go wrong as they unintentionally omit this important stage in the conditioning process.

There are a number of ways this can be done; try these two methods with your dog.

Using your hand as a target

- Start with your dog facing you and hold a treat, and the clicker, in your right hand. Show him the reward so he knows you're holding it, then clench your last two fingers down over it so he can't access it.
 - Hold out your left hand, palm facing your dog, but don't touch him.
 - Now wait. When your dog touches your palm with his nose, click and release the treat from your other hand.
 - This will need to be repeated until your dog reliably touches your palm.
- Do not be tempted to encourage or help him, as the success of this process relies on him thinking and working it out for himself.

Once he understands this, try swapping hands and get him to touch your right palm in order to receive the reward.

Holding eye contact

- With your dog facing you, hold a treat in your hand so he can see it, but don't allow him to take it.
- Wait until he stops looking at the treat and makes direct eye contact with you. At that exact moment, click and give him the treat.
- Repeat.

Initially, it may take a while before your dog makes eye contact, but don't worry as this is normal. Be patient and, after he has done it successfully a couple of times, you will be amazed how quickly he realises what to do.

NEXT STEPS

Now your dog is successfully conditioned to the clicker. Next month I will show you how you can use clicker training to teach your dog – puppy or adult – the essential foundation control exercises and manners that every pet dog needs. ●

About the author



Sue Williams BSc is a member of the Canine and Feline Behaviour Association and the Guild of Dog

Trainers. With her expertise in dog behaviour and training, Sue has an in-depth understanding of genetics and sound breeding principles, and is an expert in rearing well-adjusted puppies.

Case study

"It's easy to learn and master"

In 2011, Tarryn Peinke joined the team at the Cheshire Canine Centre as a trainee dog and animal trainer. She was introduced to clicker training and given the responsibility of training one of the centre's dogs – Roxy, a six-year-old German Shepherd Dog.

Says Tarryn: "Having not had much experience with dog training at that time, I found the clicker training method easy to learn and master without the need for expertise. At that stage, as a novice, if I happened to use the clicker at the wrong time

or for the wrong reason it had no detrimental effect on Roxy's training.

"She had previously been trained using a clicker and I found that by continuing with this method I was able to quickly establish an effective way of communicating with her.

"I have taught Roxy to weave, bow and push a pram, among other complex tasks, which we have performed at shows around the country as part of the Cheshire Dog Display team.

"Members of the public often comment on the obvious close relationship that Roxy and I share. I really feel clicker training has contributed towards our bond.

"I now regularly use the clicker when training other dogs at the centre, and also as an aid in correcting behavioural problems."



Tarryn Peinke and Roxy.

