



ARLGP FOSTER PROGRAM RESOURCES: Clicker Training – Basic Introduction

What is it?

Clicker (or marker) based training is a type of positive reinforcement training that uses a clicker (or other marking tool) to signify when a desired behavior has been displayed. Clicker training can be used with any species of animal; dog, cat, rabbits, mice, etc.

Why do we use it?

Adapted from Karen Pryor's FAQ's page: www.clickertraining.com/faq

Why is clicker training better than just using my voice, positive attention, praise, food, or other training methods?

- The click pinpoints the behavior exactly so your pet will learn desirable behavior amazingly quickly—often from one, two, or three clicks.
- The clicker provides a consistent, non-emotional marker so your pet always receives the same information. Unlike word cues, clicker training does not convey emotionally loaded approval or disapproval to the animal—it is simply information the pet can use to earn a reward or try again. The clicker is also distinct from other signals in the environment.
- The information the click provides is retained. Behavior is remembered from one training session to the next, so training sessions can be short and flexibly designed.
- Basic obedience, good manners and fun games can be easily taught, even in busy family households, where time is short and schedules hectic.
- Training can be woven into daily activities including walking to school, making dinner, or even watching TV.
- Everyone in the family—children and adults—can participate and share in the fun with your foster pets.

What do we need to get started?

- A clicker (ask us for one, if you do not have one!)
- Reward (usually small pieces of food, but for non-food motivated animals the reward can be anything they highly value).
- A pouch to hold the treats
- A space to train
- An animal that has its basic needs met, i.e. an animal that is healthy, safe, secure, and comfortable in its surroundings

How do we do it?

Practicing with the clicker

The first step to being a good clicker trainer is to be comfortable clicking and giving treats. To do this start without your foster pet in the room. If you have a second person there is an easy activity you can do. First get a tennis ball or other bouncy ball, a plastic cup and some fake treats, such as dried beans or pennies. Have your partner bounce the ball. Every time the ball hits the floor 'click' and then put a 'treat' in the cup. Practice until you can click at precisely the moment the ball hits the floor every time. When you give the treats, make sure your treat hand does not move until after the click. It should remain down by your side or even behind your back until the click is completed. Make sure your partner uses a random pattern of bouncing the ball.

If you do not have a partner, try using something that does not require a second person as the 'behavior' to mark. One example would be to turn the radio or television and click every time you hear the word "and".

Learning a bit more about clicker work

Check out this article, *Fifteen Tips for Getting Started with the Clicker* from Karen Pryor Clicker Training: <https://www.clickertraining.com/15tips>

Charging the clicker

Next you are going to get your pet used to the clicker. Start in a quiet environment free of distractions. First simply click, pausing for 1 second, and then giving your foster pet a treat. Repeat this 10-15 times at a rate of about 1 click every 3-4 seconds. Repeat this in separate sessions 2-3 times. (Note* If your foster pet is afraid of the click noise try muffling the sound or using a clicking pen instead.)

Capturing a Behavior

The following instructions are based on getting a dog to sit, but remember, all of these training concepts and techniques can be used across any species. You should observe your pet for a while first and identify a behavior they do on their own regularly.

Capturing a dog behavior requires the animal to "think" about the situation and it uses only behaviors freely offered by your canine friend. This method is based on the concept of operant conditioning, is how animals make an association between their own behavior and a consequence. In this case the consequence will be a reward.

For this technique, you wait for your hound to do the desired behavior and then instantly reward it. The key is to have great timing and be very consistent.

Capturing a dog behavior is how most people, without realizing it, teach their pets to sit for them to place the food bowl on the floor. They wait until the dog is sitting, and only then they lower the food bowl for the dog to it.

Steps:

1. Pick a behavior you want to capture. Observe your pet for a while and pick a behavior that they offer often and freely on their own. This way, you assure success (click and treat) occurs more quickly and often, thereby reducing frustration for both your dog and you.
2. Grab your treats, treat pouch and clicker.
3. Sit or stand patiently and watch your pup.
4. When he does the behavior you are looking for... **Mark and Reward!**

Things to keep in mind:

- Keep your treat hand still until after the click (moving your hand toward the treat pouch early can cause your foster animal to focus on the treat pouch, rather than on you).
 - Keep training sessions short to avoid frustration (for both animal and human).
 - Click the moment you see the desired behavior, not after (it's important that the clicker marks the precise moment the behavior is given in order to avoid confusion).
 - If you click, you must treat. Even if the click was an accident. Your dog must believe that every time he hears a click a treat will follow.
 - If your dog is food motivated use their kibble as treats to avoid overfeeding.
5. Repeat several times. The behavior should start happening more often.
 6. When you are reasonably assured the behavior will take place, add a cue (verbal, auditory or physical signal). For example, if you are capturing a sit, say "sit" just before the behavior is about to occur. The idea is to say the cue word (i.e.: "Sit") right as your pet is sitting. This requires you to pay careful attention during a training session.

Things to keep in mind:

- Cue's can be verbal, visual, or auditory. You may choose to use a hand gesture instead of the word sit and that's just fine. So long as it is consistent.
- Don't cue the behavior until you see it being given consistently. For example, click the bottom touching the floor (for sit) several times before adding the word "sit".
- Once you've added a cue, only mark and reward when your dog sits when you have cued the behavior. DO NOT reward your pooch for sitting down if you didn't give the cue.
- Make sure to click and treat every single time if you did cue a behavior.
- The more a behavior is positively reinforced the more consistently it will be offered on cue.
- Be patient and do not repeat cues. If you give the cue sit and your dog does not sit take a break and do something else fun and interactive with your dog. Do not repeat the cue. If this happens more than once you may need to return to capturing.
- You will not always need to carry treats, but the more you mark and reward the behavior, the more consistent it will be given in other settings and without treats on you.

If you have gotten this far you may be ready to capture other behaviors or even shape behaviors. If so, we highly recommend that you join one of our basic group training classes. If you are struggling with using clicker-based training, you are also a great candidate for our group classes. Sign up here: <https://arlgp.org/resources/dog-training/>.

In the meantime, you can check out these videos below:

- Basics of Clicker Training: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NydiXQQYiY>
- How to start clicker training: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvw2bcGcoDk>
- Charging the Clicker, Attention, Sit, Touch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V80JVAibXLQ>