

Canine Conduct

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The Clicker

This first step is essential - don't skip it!

With this method we are going to be "shaping behaviours". You need a way to signal to the dog that he has just performed whatever behaviour it is that you were trying to get. Initially he will also get a treat for each correct response but since that takes a few seconds (at least) to happen, the clicker marks the exact moment of response, essentially "bridging" the time between response & reward. This is classical conditioning, like Pavlov & his drooling dogs. You are going to take a clicker & pair it with a food reward until the click itself gets the dog all happy.

So.. get yourself some clickers - little toy-like devices that make a fun click sound. I have found that they get the dog more interested, and once the dog catches on to this type of training the presence of a clicker will be enough to get him excited & in "training mode". If you prefer (or while you are waiting for your clicker to arrive), choose a "bridge word" instead. I suggest "Yes!!" - it is short & happy! Say it briskly, in a rather high pitched, & very excited voice. I will be using the term C&T in the lessons, meaning to click & give a treat. If you are using a bridge word, just say it & give a treat whenever I have written C&T. You won't be clicking forever... they are only used in the training phase of any new behaviour!

Okay, go in a quiet room with your dog & have a bowl of really tasty treats. Human type food such as hot dogs, chicken, roast beef, etc. works really well, so do high quality (all natural) dog treats such as the Oinker Roll. The treats should be cut up into very small pieces & be soft (crunchy ones take too long to eat).

Now, as long as your dog isn't doing anything naughty at the moment, click your clicker (or say your bridge word) and toss him a treat. Then say it again & again toss or give a treat. We are NOT asking for a behaviour (such as sit) here at all... just making the connection needed for the clicker to be effective. (A few dogs are frightened by the click sound. If your dog is, then try muffling the sound by having it in a pocket. The fear shouldn't last long!)

Repeat 10-12 times. You'll know when you can stop - you'll click & your dog will immediately look up at you, "There is that sound, so where is my treat?".

I'll give you a few minutes to go do this...

There! Wasn't that fun? Excellent job, trainers!

AN IMPORTANT NOTE! To really succeed with this method of training, it is essential that the bridge, whether it be a clicker or a word, ALWAYS be followed by a terrific reinforcement. It is usually referred to as click and treat for a reason. That is one danger of using the bridge word.... I found that I said "Yes" to my dog at times when I wasn't necessarily training & didn't follow through with a treat (or something equally rewarding for her).

Now you're ready for Targeting!

From:
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Targeting

This one is really fun & easy! You are going to teach your dog to touch something with his nose on cue. Do this because: it's fun, it's a good way to teach finishes, it can be used to desensitize a dog to nail clipping time, to teach agility, musical freestyle, & obedience trials exercises as well as for teaching service dog type behaviours. I teach it first because I think it is the best behaviour for teaching both the owner & the dog just how clicker training works.

Here's what you do:

Stand in front of your dog (or kneel in front of a little one). Have a bunch of little treats in your right hand (just hanging at your side).

Quickly bring your left hand, empty, palm forward almost right up to his nose. I guarantee the first time he'll poke it, hoping it contains that treat he smells. Super! He touched you! C&T (Click & Treat), giving the treat from your right hand. Be sure you clicked just at the exact moment he touched your hand! If you aren't in time, don't click at all, just praise.

Do again & again, gradually moving your left hand a bit farther back so eventually he is reaching out or walking to touch it. But do it gradually - over several sessions. I knew my Rottie Teddy had the concept when she would reach out to touch my hand, but keep eye contact with me the entire time.

Now... at the seminar where I learned this from trainer Leslie Nelson, she said that many dogs will do this excitedly about 6 times, then lose interest & just look at you. Don't quit - just put your right hand (with the treat) behind your left for a time or two.

You can add the command (or "cue") pretty quickly because the behaviour is so easy. As soon as your dog reliably touching your hand when you offer it, begin saying "Touch!" as you put your left hand out.

Next steps are to have your dog touch your right hand instead (treat from left) and start to become variable with rewarding.

Also have the dog start to jump up to touch!

To use it to teach a finish to the left, you swing your left hand way back with "Touch!", then after the dog has touched it back there immediately bring it forward again for another touch at heel position. Perfect finish! My obedience school partner, Susan, just taught her GSD puppy to do a great flip finish by using this by having him jump up to touch before coming around.

You can also then use the command "Touch" to mean touch other things. The first time or two you will need to point closely to the desired object but he will get the idea quickly.

Now you're ready for Attention, Please!



Attention, Please!

Okay, folks! Now that you have your dog conditioned to the clicker (or bridge word) you are ready for the next step. (Miss that lesson? The Clicker).

Again, go to a room without a whole lot of distraction, one where your dog already finds you more than usually interesting (the kitchen is usually best!). Have your bowl of tasty treats ready.

Say your dog's name ONCE in an upbeat, happy voice. When he turns to look at you, C&T. Then let him get a bit distracted by something and do it again. And again! You are looking for: he hears his name, and turns to look at you (okay at this point if he is just looking at your hand)! Many dogs will also come closer to you which is fine but not required.

If when you first say his name he doesn't look, then reach forward & gently touch him on the side or something so he turns around. Even if he doesn't look right at you, C&T. He'll soon get the idea!

At first, hold the treats in your hand, but then progress to having them sitting on the counter. Looking at the bowl of treats gets him nowhere... he needs to turn to look at you! If he keeps looking at the bowl, be patient... he will eventually turn to look at you. If he doesn't, then you can give your "No Reward Marker" (NRM). I say "nope" and turn away - give him NO attention. No treat. Try again from scratch after a few moments.

Here are the next few steps. Take it slowly - but when he is consistently doing a step correctly then you can move on to the next!

This time have him sitting or standing in front of you. Have a little treat in each hand. Say his name, and then bring the treats up to your face so he looks up there. Hold each treat just outside of your eyes. The hope is that he begins by looking from one to the other - then end up looking into your eyes. When he does look up at your face, INSTANTLY C&T and then praise! Give him both treats if you like - one from each hand. You will quickly be able to go to the next step.

The next step is to stand in front of him, a treat in each hand but both hands hanging naturally at your side. Say his name. He is very likely to spend a few moments sniffing at your hands! Just stand there & ignore that and wait... he will eventually look up at you ("hey! What is going on here?") at which point you instantly C&T! Then let him get a bit distracted and do it again. Soon you will find it difficult to LOSE his attention! At that point start to drop the treats on the ground when you C&T - when he is just finishing up a treat then you can say his name again.

Next step is to have your hands behind your back (with the treats). Repeat as before, C&T'ing for eye contact.

Then, have the treats completely out of sight (in a pocket or even in your mouth) and your hands just back at your sides, empty. You are teaching him to give you eye contact when you ask for it... regardless of whether he sees a treat being offered.



When your dog is quite reliably responding to you at this point (I hope you are remembering to say his name only ONCE) then you need to start being variable with how often you C&T a response. By doing this you can shape your dog's responses to be even better as well as decrease the risk that he will become food dependent. There are two ways in which his response can improve - how quickly he looks up at you, and how long he holds the eye contact. Shape each one separately! Say you decide to go for a quick response first. From then on, only C&T if he turns right away when you say his name. If he takes too long, you can just ignore that or perhaps smile, but it earns no C&T. You might want to have better than usual treats for this, since he will need to work a little harder in order to figure out what exactly it is you want now. When you decide to work on length of eye contact, stop C&T'ing the instant he looks at you, instead hold out a bit. Increase the required time in little increments, say for a count of 2 at first. If he's still looking deeply into your eyes - C&T and give a jackpot! If he turns away too soon, ignore him or even better, give your NRM. Then try again.

At this point your dog is ready to learn to respond even around distractions. To start this, have him sit in front of you. Say his name and C&T for a response. Then, while he is still focused on you, have another person approach from the side. Your dog will likely turn & look at her. She (your friend) should immediately turn away, ceasing to show any interest. You say his name and C&T a correct response. If he doesn't respond, then just wait a bit. It might take a minute or two but your dog will eventually lose interest in this now-boring visitor & look at you again. The instant he does, you C&T, giving a jackpot reward! Then your friend should approach again & repeat the above. You will find that very quickly your dog can hardly be bothered with the visitor. After all... YOU are far far more interesting!

Notice that there are two ways in which you are making this exercise more difficult for your dog: length of eye contact required before you C&T AND responding in spite of a distraction. Initially, be sure to work on only ONE of those at a time. When working on length, do it without distractions. When introducing distractions, don't require any length of time, instead C&T'ing a quick look. In fact, when a dog responds at all in the face of a very strong distraction (such as another dog coming over to play), I would C&T as soon as he turned toward you, not even waiting for him to look up at your eyes. What a good boy for paying attention to you at all instead of playing! Work on all of the pieces separately like this, then you will be able to put them all together. This concept applies to every exercise you will teach your pet!

Please keep all of these training sessions SHORT & FUN. Stop when your dog is still having fun!

From that point you can use it whenever, wherever... You are outside & he sees another dog you'd rather he didn't? If you practised this faithfully you should be able to say his name & have him instantly turn to look at you instead of the other dog!

Whenever you get a "breakthrough" or an exceptional performance like that, be sure to give a jackpot reward! That could be a really delicious treat or 5-6 bits of treats, given one at a time to lengthen the time spent getting it. After the initial teaching, the reward doesn't have to be food. It is far better to vary the reward: sometimes food, sometimes a ball tossed, sometimes a belly rub, sometimes the door opened so he can go outside. Discover what things your dog is the most excited by! Dogs certainly vary with that - my older dog Bear loves human attention & ear rubs, while my younger Rottie, Teddy, was never happy unless her reward was food. She was a natural born piggy! Use your imagination & be unpredictable!

Have fun!

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