

STARTING WITH CLICKER

Worksheet for practical lessons with František Šusta; www.trainingisdialogue.com



WARNING, THIS SHEET SERVES FOR STRUCTURED LESSONS WITH A TRAINER, not as instructions for use



Hey, how can I can focus on my training when you still CLICK with something all the time?!

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THE CLICKER IN ITSELF IS ONLY A PIECE OF CLICKING METAL. IT BECOMES AN ACTUAL TRAINING AID ONLY THROUGH CORRECT USE IN THE TRAINING DIALOGUE WITH THE ANIMAL.

Clicker training is a training method in which we work by positive reinforcement, explaining the required behaviour to the animal in a dialogue consisting of the following items: CUE - BEHAVIOUR - BRIDGE - REINFORCER. Clicker is often used as the bridge, i.e. the marker telling "that was right now". Its advantage is due to the fact that it is fast, clear and unmistakable. But we can also use a word, another sound, light, etc.

STEP ONE OF THE DIALOGUE = REINFORCER: The dialogue "cue - behaviour - bridge - reinforcer" is put together "from the back". Thus the first thing we must explain to the animal is that we have a favourable reinforcer.

Warning: some dog fanciers believe that we can decide directly on behalf of the dog what its reinforcer will be, even if the dog was absolutely not interested in such kind of reinforcer. If we impose the reinforcer on the dog, the positive dialogue cannot work, even if the dog eats it from duty. The animal's response, not the handler's opinion decides of what reinforcer is and what punishment is.

Task No. 1: Give several reinforcers to the dog just for the good of it and state, according to the dog's response: Do I have a working reinforcer? (check the answer)

YES, my dog stays next to me after getting the first reinforcer and waits for the next.

NO, my dog does not eat it, or goes away to seek another entertainment after having eaten the first reinforcer.

There are many ways to make the reinforcer more attractive to the dog. They are for example: "short opportunity windows, contrafreeloading, behaviour momentum, jackpots, etc. (see the Motivation topic)... but all that is adequate only for a dog that is used to clicker training already. At this moment, when you are only starting together, I suggest just FINDING A BETTER REINFORCER, if a reinforcer does not work, and starting work in a calm environment without further attractions.

STEP TWO OF THE DIALOGUE = BRIDGE: Bridge is the marker indicating the arrival of the reinforcer to the animal. We are usually not able to give the treat to the dog exactly at the moment it has done the required behaviour, but always with a delay. And at such moment, it is often not clear for what the reinforcer was given (for example if a puppy sits down correctly and the handler reaches for the treat, the puppy usually stands up and gets the treat only when standing, i.e. without relation to sitting down). On the contrary, the bridge can be given exactly at the moment of the behaviour, and it is therefore much clearer.

A lot of animals capture something in our behaviour as immediately preceding the reinforcer, and then they use it as their own bridge. It often is a word, reaching into the treat pocket, a specific body move. But such bridges can cause problems in practice - for example a dog working only by the hand reaching to the pocket won't turn its back to the handler, in order to preserve eye contact with the pocket. But the dog working by clicker will turn its back to us, because its bridge can be heard (while the hand could only be heard).

Task No. 2: - HAVE THE DOG ASSOCIATE THE CLICKER SOUND WITH THE REINFORCER. Your dog now knows that you have the reinforcers and is waiting for them. So just click several (not many) times and give the dog a reinforcer. **WARNING: CLICKING MUST BE THE ABSOLUTELY FIRST**

THING BY WHICH THE DOG WILL KNOW THAT IT WILL GET THE REINFORCER (so for example, if I reach into my pocket, click and take out my hand with the reinforcer, it is a mistake because reaching into the pocket preceded the clicker, and therefore became the bridge)

Does your dog respond to the clicker? We usually can tell it by its response on clicking. It is natural that as soon as the sound is heard, the dog turns its head towards the reinforcers, or terminates the exercise it was doing. DON'T PUNISH THE DOG FOR TERMINATING THE EXERCISE AFTER CLICKING! CLICKER = TERMINANT BRIDGE, AS IT GIVES THREE PIECES OF INFORMATION: 1) YOU WILL GET THE REINFORCER 2) AS YOU HAVE DONE THIS BEHAVIOUR 3) AND YOU NEED NOT CONTINUE, IT HAS FINISHED.

STEP THREE OF THE DIALOGUE = BEHAVIOUR: At this moment, we already have good reinforcers for which the dog works. We also have the bridge that marks success. So we can agree a new behaviour with the dog.

The principles described in the Shaping worksheet apply to create a new behaviour. For the first familiarization with the clicker, we will choose something simple, natural to the dog, something that won't unsettle it by its difficulty, but won't "endanger" it either (e.g. lying back in presence of strange dogs would expose the dog to potential attack, and therefore such experience could unsettle it).

Task No. 3 - SHAPE A SIMPLE BEHAVIOUR in small steps, from easy to difficult. Click and reinforcer each small step fulfilled. Keep clicking so that the sound is the first thing preceding the reinforcer. Keep giving the reinforcers in the same manner, and even if you have "let slip a click" prematurely, give the reinforcer - the dog is now creating the click-reinforcer relation and you must not breach this connection.

Plan your steps in advance according to the Shaping worksheets. For example the „Nose touch“ on your hand is trained from the first look at the hand to touch at short distance, tough to long distance, to holding the nose to your hand, etc.

STEP FOUR OF THE DIALOGUE = CUE: I say "cue" and not "command" to make clear that it is not an obligation (now you MUST) but an opportunity to perform a behaviour and earn a reinforcer for it (now you HAVE A CHANCE). Your dog is offering a new behaviour to you now, maybe by itself, without a cue, or on another cue (for example at "nose touch", the dog touches the hand because it has learned it through the hand). We want to teach a new command, and it must come as CHANCE. Therefore we will give it only to a dog that is evidently attentive and ready to work, and we will give it as the absolutely first signal before any other existing cue.

For example in case of the above stated "nose touch", we already have the cue of "Hand held out". If I still have not hold out my hand and the dog has sat down in front of me and is waiting attentively for me to hold my hand out, I will say "Touch" (a new cue) and hold out my hand (old cue). So I explain the relation several times, and then I can let my hand in place and only say "Touch" and reinforcer the touch on verbal cue. Touches without verbal cue are not reinforced any more.

Warning: passing to verbal command will necessarily bring situations when the dog will try even without the command, and therefore won't be reinforced. So it will necessarily collect several failures that can discourage it from further work. Therefore plan the situation in advance to make it the most successful as possible for the dog and thus the most motivating (therefore we first reached the hand out only after the verbal command, not letting it there between the attempts - to prevent vain attempts and frustrations).

Task No. 4 - CREATE A VERBAL COMMAND according to the above stated instructions

Final note:

During the whole time, we build the dialogue consisting of four words - stimulus, behaviour, bridge, reward - from the back. But if you have read the text attentively and, especially, if you already have started working with your animal, you certainly see that there is one word more. The word by which the animal tells us "I want to work". Without that word, we won't know whether our animal is ready to work, and positive training will become mere pressure. Please always pay attention to whether your animal wants to work and in which manner it communicates that to you. And also don't let it express its effort by anything in which it could "get tougher" (e.g. by whining, barking, etc.). An active calm look at you will do. Then your dialogue will be complete:

I WANT TO WORK (animal) - STIMULUS (human) - BEHAVIOUR (animal) - BRIDGE (human)
- REWARD (given by human, owned by animal).

I WISH MUCH FUN ☺