

Cat Clicker Training

Clicker training uses a precise sound (a click) to tell the cat that he has done something to earn a reward. Think of the clicker as the shutter of a camera: you click when you see the correct "picture" of the behavior you're training your cat to perform. You immediately give the cat a treat. Remember, those behaviors that result in a good consequence for the cat (positive reinforcement) will most likely be repeated. Your cat quickly learns that he can get you to give him a treat by performing a certain behavior. Clicker training is fun for your cat to train you and fun for you to train your cat!

First Step: Association

Begin clicker training by first helping your cat associate the sound of the click with a treat. Click, then give your cat a treat; repeat five times. Click when he's in different positions and when you're in different positions. For now, your cat doesn't have to do anything to get the treat—these are "freebies." A good indication that your cat understands this association is to click when he's distracted (looking away from you). If he turns his head toward you when you click, he probably associates the click with a treat.

Tips:

- Don't hold the clicker too close to your cat's face. Some cats find this intimidating or startling, and other cats fixate on the clicker. Try muffling the clicker by hiding it behind your back or in your pocket.
- If you have a sound-sensitive cat, the sound of the clicker may be too scary. Try holding the clicker in your pocket, or wrap it with a handkerchief to make the sound quieter. If your cat is still frightened of the sound, you can use a verbal marker (such as "yes") instead of a clicker.
- Only click once. Always give a treat following the click.
- When your cat associates the click with a treat, try to "capture" a behavior. If you catch him doing something you like (maybe the way he tilts his head) click and treat whenever he does the behavior. You'll find he starts to do it more often in order to get the treat.

Second Step: Shaping

Choose one spontaneous behavior or something your cat does that you like. Some examples are sitting, looking at you, raising a paw, or lying on his bed. Each time you see your cat doing this behavior, click and treat. You need to be observant, and have your clicker and treats handy at all times. When you catch your cat doing something right, let him know.

Once you start clicking and treating your cat for a behavior, be prepared to see the behavior often. Don't choose a behavior that will become obnoxious when performed frequently.

Tips:

- Reward (click and treat) partial steps in the right direction, gradually getting closer to the final position. Repeat until your cat performs the behavior easily. This is known as "shaping" a behavior.
- Start training in a place with no distractions (other household pets, children, squirrels, neighborhood cats, etc.).
- Gather together a variety of motivators. Food treats should be small, soft, and smelly. Let your cat select his favorites. Other motivators – petting, toys, or playtime – work well at the end of a training session.
- Always combine food and other motivators with verbal praise such as "good job!"

- If you make a mistake and click at the wrong time, don't worry about it, but do go ahead and give your cat a treat anyway. The click must always mean a treat is coming. Next time, pay attention and be ready to click at the precise moment your cat performs the behavior (e.g., his bottom hits the floor for a sit).
- It is better to click too early than too late. If you click too early, you can shape the correct behavior by rewarding progressive steps. If you click too late, you may be reinforcing the wrong behavior.
- Cats learn at different rates. Don't get frustrated if your cat doesn't seem to learn as quickly as you'd expect. Make sure you're being consistent in the cues you give (verbal and nonverbal).

Third Step: Name It

Give the verbal cue (e.g., "sit") and/or a hand motion (which will become a hand signal). Click, and give the treat from your other hand. If you get no response or an incorrect response, don't click and treat. If you still get no response or an incorrect response, go back to shaping the behavior a few more times, and then try again.

Tips:

- If your cat doesn't immediately perform the behavior, the temptation is to repeat the cue. Don't fall for it – you don't want your cat to get into the habit of responding only after the third or fourth time you repeat the cue.
- Check your posture. Work toward an upright posture rather than bending over your cat.
- Don't assume that your cat will instantly associate the name with the behavior. Lots of repetitions may be needed before your cat will reliably perform the behavior on cue.
- Keep training sessions short – even 30 seconds at a time will do.

Fourth Step: Up the Ante

Gradually require more from your cat to earn the click and treat. For example, have him perform two or three behaviors before rewarding him, increase the time or distance (not both) of your stay, work in a more distracting place, change your position in relation to your cat, or reward the faster or straighter sit. Go ahead and praise your cat for correct responses, but instead of rewarding every response, reward the second, third, or fourth response.

Tips:

- Start by working on the basic behavior in every room of your home. When your cat is reliable in these settings, work with him outside (on leash and with few distractions at first). Don't assume that your cat is ready to perform around other animals.
- Don't be discouraged if your cat seems to forget all of his training when he's in a new location. He may do it perfectly at home but then stare at you dumbfounded when you try to show off your training skills. Make it a little easier for him at first (go through the shaping steps again).
- When you increase the difficulty of your training (e.g., by adding distractions), also increase the value of the reward for a successful performance; choose a better treat than the one you normally use for training.
- Don't ask for too much too soon. If your cat is losing interest in the training session, take a short play break as a reward for an easier task. Then resume your training.