

CLICKERS, MARKERS AND COMMUNICATION – GETTING STARTED

We will be teaching your dog to look to you for information, rewards and generally the good stuff in life. For this to happen you need to be looking out for good stuff to reward (reinforce), provide lots of chances to get it right, and use really great rewards.

Possible rewards your dog may like:

Food

- Cheese
- Sausage
- Liver
- Ham
- Fishy treats
- Cooked chicken

Games

- Chasing a ball
- Soft toys
- Squeaky toys (not in class please!)
- Playing tuggy with you

Other

- Rough hair day
- Verbal praise
- Have a party (cheering/clapping/fuss)

Important things to remember about rewards

- The dog must want them! Imagine if you were a music lover and were offered the choice between the concert of your dreams, and a seminar with an English professor. Which would you want to work for???
- Food rewards must be: SMALL, SOFT, EASILY SWALLOWED. About the size of your pinky nail.
- No squeaky toys in class (too distracting)
- Be variable – different food treats, different amounts, mix in toys and play if your dog enjoys them.
- When you are in a distracting environment (like class) don't expect your dog to work for a boring piece of kibble or a biscuit – make it worth their while...

Reward marking: when you are teaching your dog, you need a way to clearly communicate when he has done the right thing. The simplest and quickest way to do this is by using a 'marker'.

A marker can be

- Clicker
- A short single syllable word/sound e.g. good / yes / X

You can use both interchangeably – handy if you don't have a clicker around or if you lose your voice ☺

Think of the marker as a camera flash – it captures the moment or behaviour you want to reward, so it doesn't matter if the dog then moves to get the treat, it is all about WHEN you marked.

A word on luring: it's very easy to start off luring behaviours especially if you have a reluctant or nervous dog. Try to avoid this unless absolutely necessary and instead establish a really strong targeting behaviour so you can eliminate the food!

Food and other reinforcers are used as a salary payment – not out right bribery

Dog understands the marker

- Say 'yes' or CLICK, and deliver food immediately
- Repeat 4-5 times
- Say 'yes' or CLICK and wait – if the dog turns to you, shows interest or looks for the treat then he understands that marker = food reward

If dog does not clearly make the association, repeat first step several times more. You may want to spend a couple of days making sure this first lesson has really sunk in for your pup before moving on.

DO NOT ROUTINELY USE THE CLICKER TO ATTRACT YOUR DOG'S ATTENTION – THIS IS JUST A ONE-OFF TEST!

Using your marker or clicker to teach attention

Once your dog has understood that the marker means he has the chance to earn a tasty food treat, you're likely to find your dog spends more time watching you. Take advantage of this - anytime your dog looks up at you Click and Treat.

You can add a cue word to this like "watch me" or "look at me" later on, but its worth while encouraging this as a DEFAULT behaviour – something that becomes a reflex for your dog especially when they might not be sure what to do next.

Teaching a position using food and marker

Step 1

- The chances are your dog is already offering a sit¹ if there is the chance of some food around, or you can hold your hand as though there might be food in it over your dog's head
- → as soon as dog's bum hits the ground CLICK or YES
- → deliver reward from your hand
- Repeat several times

Step 2: hand signal

- Use a hand movement as in step two
- → as soon as dog's bum hits the ground CLICK or YES
- → deliver reward from your pocket!
- Repeat until dog is clearly sitting to the visual cue

Step 3: adding the verbal cue

- Ask for a sit (VERBAL)
- mimic your hand movement from earlier stages WITHOUT any food in your hand (VISUAL)
- → as soon as dog's bum hits the ground CLICK or YES
- → deliver reward!
- Repeat a few times

- QUIZ TIME: give your VERBAL cue and wait, if dog then sits give huge reward! If struggling give a SMALL visual hand signal to 'help'

Teaching the hand target food and marker – Getting Started

Having your dog learn to 'target' your hand is a very useful basic skill – by teaching your dog to touch his nose to your hand/fingers we can then use our hand to guide the dog behind us (to hide), away from something (food or another dog), and tricks like twisting and weaving.

Using a hand target means the dog is actively thinking and engaging rather than just following a piece of food as a lure!

Offer your hand or fingers in an obvious way close to the dog's face

Mark/click and reward when they touch nose to hand

Repeat several times before starting to present hand at a slight distance from dog's face

Build to dog moving several feet to touch your hand, following it happily!

¹ Sit is just one example, you can pick any behaviour you are training e.g. down, stand, twist, paw...