

Clicker Training Basics



One of the fastest ways to train an animal is with “clicker training.” This type of positive reinforcement training involves using a marker sound, in this case a “click,” to communicate that an animal is doing something you want her to do.

The click sound is analogous to the sound of a camera shutter: you push the button on a camera to take a picture of something you like, and the camera produces a sound when the shutter opens and closes. With the clicker, you push the button to “take a picture” of a behavior you like or want to see more often.

Pushing the clicker button produces the “click” sound, after which you immediately reward the cat with a reinforcer (something the cat enjoys) such as a treat, toy, or attention. Because the reinforcer immediately follows the click, the behavior that happened during the click is positively reinforced. That is, the cat learns that if she performs a certain behavior she will get a treat. Soon enough the cat knows just how to get you to make the click sound: complete the behavior again!

Supplies:

You’ll need a button clicker (a mechanical plastic device that makes a click sound when you push a button) and a reinforcer that the cat will love. Examples of common reinforcers are: food treats, fabric mice, mylar balls, or gentle petting. Note that the button clicker we use in *Cat Pawsitive* is different from the box-shaped clickers you might typically see sold in a pet store or see used for dog training. Box-shaped clickers have a much louder sound than we want to use for cats. If you don’t have a clicker, you can use a click-top pen to make the sound.

Quick Click Tip:

You can hold the clicker in your pocket, place it under your foot, or attach it to your arm with a wrist coil.

Choose a Reinforcer:



Each cat is an individual with unique likes and dislikes. When choosing reinforcers, you must identify objects, activities, or interactions that each cat enjoys. Many cats are food motivated and enjoy various treats such as commercially available cat treats (we use Halo® Liv-A-Littles treats in *Cat Pawsitive*), canned cat food, meat-based baby foods, or lean meats. Present the cat with the variety of treats you have in order to see which they prefer. All of the treats that a cat eats readily are possible reinforcers.

You can do the same process with toys to identify toys or games a cat enjoys, like chasing a wand toy. For cats who solicit physical touch, you can use gentle petting (up to 2 strokes) as a reinforcer.

Association:

The sound of a clicker means nothing to an animal in the beginning. With repeated pairings of the click followed by a reinforcer presented to the cat, he will associate the sound of the click with the reinforcer. You do not need to train this association separately from a training session. It will happen naturally during your training sessions.

Quick Click Tip:

For food-based reinforcers, click only once and then follow the click with a treat (even if the cat doesn’t show much interest or takes more than 10 seconds to eat the treat).

Start Training:

Pick a behavior you'd like to encourage. Start using the clicker followed by a reinforcer to communicate to the cat that she is doing a behavior you would like to see more of in the future. Behaviors cats offer naturally like sitting, looking at you, or sniffing an object are good behaviors with which to start your training. You need to be diligent: watch the cat and have your clicker and reinforcers ready immediately. When your cat does the behavior you want, let her know...click then reinforce! *"Click then reinforce" always occurs after the behavior you want is observed.*

Quick Click Tip:

Think of this as the old "hot/cold" game. "Cold" is you not clicking; "hot" is the click followed by a reinforcer.

IMPORTANT NOTES: If your cat performs a behavior that you do not like, *simply ignore it.* Wait for behaviors you like. Once you start clicking a desired behavior, you will see this behavior offered more and more. Make sure the behavior you are clicking for is one you want to see more often. If you click at the wrong time, give the cat a reinforcer anyway. *The click must always mean a reinforcer is coming.* Don't worry about a mistaken click, no one is perfect. Do your best to work on your clicker skills so you make the fewest possible mistakes.

Adding a Cue:

Once the cat is reliably offering the behavior you desire, it is time to put the behavior on cue. A verbal cue is a sound-based signal (e.g. saying "sit"). A visual cue is a sight-based signal (e.g. holding your palm up to receive a high five) that the cat will associate with a specific behavior. The trainer creates this association by giving the signal a second before the cat offers the behavior. The goal is to turn the verbal or visual signal into a cue: when the cat sees or hears the signal, she will automatically complete the behavior.

For example: You are working on "High Five." You have taught the behavior using the click then reinforce, and you can tell the cat is about to raise her paw to touch your hand. You have decided that the verbal cue is to say "High Five!" enthusiastically. Just as you see her begin to raise her paw, say "High Five!" As soon as she completes the behavior, immediately click then reinforce.



Quick Click Tip:

Once you have started to convert the signal to a cue you should no longer click then treat for the behavior if you did not give the cue first.

After you have established this "cue – behavior – click – reinforce" pattern, you will want to begin giving the cue earlier and earlier each time and waiting for her to complete the behavior. Eventually, you will give the cue before the cat starts the behavior. When you give the cue and she immediately completes the behavior, you can say she has mastered the behavior and it is now "on cue." Once you have the behavior on cue, start working on another behavior.

Remember that natural feline behaviors build the most success for you and the cat, bringing joy to the process of training for both of you. Any cat can be trained to engage in any behavior that they are physically and mentally capable of. The Jackson Galaxy Project can help you and your cats keep that training joy alive by providing support and helping you identify trainers with cat experience who can help you with advanced behaviors with the cats in your shelters and rescues.

