Clicker Training Quick Start

One of the fastest ways to train an animal is "clicker training." This training involves using a marker sound, 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 of. Pushing the button produces the "click" sound, after which you immediately reward the cat with a treat. Because the treat follows the click, the behavior that happened during the click is positively reinforced: the cat learns that if she performs a certain behavior she will get a treat. Soon enough the cat knows how to get you to make the click sound: complete the behavior again. You both will be having fun in no time.

Supplies:

You'll need include a clicker (a mechanical plastic device that makes a click sound when you push a button) and treats that the cats will love. Note that the button clicker is different than the box-shaped clickers you might typically see utilized for dogs. Box-shaped clickers have a much louder sound than we would want to use for cats.

Quick Click Tip:

Hold the clicker in your pocket or behind your back, because the sound (if too close to the cat's face) can cause fear due to how loud it can be.

Association:

The sound of a clicker at first means nothing to an animal, so you need to build an association between the sound, the behavior and the reward. Make sure you have all of the supplies you will need and that you are in a relatively quiet room. Push the clicker button and then follow it immediately with a treat for the cat. Do this several times. Once your cat shows a signal that she is recognizing the click/treat association (for example: quick ear movement, looking at the spot the treat was delivered the last time) then you are ready to start training a behavior.

Start Training:

Pick a behavior you'd like to encourage and start using the clicker and treat to communicate to the cat that she is doing what you want. Some of the behaviors that the cat offers naturally (which are the best to start with) are "sitting," "looking at you," or "sniffing an object." Each time you see the cat offer the behavior, click then treat. You need to be diligent: watch the cat and have your clicker and treats ready immediately. When you catch the cat doing the behavior you like, let her know.

Quick Click Tip:

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).

IMPORTANT NOTES: If your cat performs a behavior that you do not like, *simply ignore it* and wait for the 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 that you actually want to see more often. If you click at the wrong time, don't worry about it; just go ahead and give the cat a treat anyway. *The click must always mean a treat is coming*. No one is perfect, so just do your best to build your clicker skills so you make the fewest possible mistakes.

Adding a Cue:

Once the cat is offering the behavior you desire it is time to put it on a cue. A cue is a verbal/sound-based signal (ex: you say, "Sit.") or a visual signal (ex: you point your finger downward) that the cat associates with a behavior. The association between the signal and the behavior is created by you, the trainer, by giving the signal *right before* the cat offers the behavior. The goal is to turn the signal into a cue: when the cat sees or hears the signal she will automatically offer the behavior.

For example: You are working on "sit." You have taught the behavior using click/treat, and you can tell when the cat is about to offer this behavior. You have decided that the cue for "sit" will be you verbally saying the word "Sit." Now, just as you see the behavior starting, give the signal (that is, say, "Sit."). After the cat offers the behavior, immediately click/treat.

After you have established this signal-behavior-click/treat pattern, you will want to begin lengthening the time between when you give the signal ("Sit.") and the when behavior is given. You will do this by giving the signal just a bit earlier and earlier each time. You will soon start to notice that the cat will be waiting for your signal. *This is when the signal has become a cue.* That means the cat will wait to give the behavior until you give the cue.

Once you have one behavior on cue, start working on another behavior. Remember that natural feline behaviors build the most success for you and the cat, and this will bring joy to the process for both of you. There are, of course, many other types of behaviors that can be trained. Working with a skilled trainer to coach you through those advanced behaviors can keep the joy going for you and a long-term-resident cat in your shelter or your own cat at home.

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