

Clicker Training For Small Pets

By Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin

Rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, rats and other small pets are full of energy and mischief—but you may be surprised to discover they are also trainable. Clicker training can help develop positive behaviour, as well as a bond between human and animal.

The level of activity and problem solving required for finding food, creating homes and staying safe is not required of a pet living in a cage or a human house. Training sessions allow the animal to use its natural abilities, thus providing mental and physical stimulation. This contributes to a longer and happier life. “Clicking with small pets brightens their lives, exercises their minds and brings out their personalities,” says Karen Pryor, a clicker training specialist. “It is easy to learn and mentally and physically enriching for pets and their owners.” Clicker training can help you engage in more activities with your pet, improve its behaviour, clip its nails without a fight and teach it to come out from behind the fridge, among other results.

When it clicks

In clicker training, a sound is used to mark correct behaviour. This click is made by pressing a small handheld device and is always followed closely with a treat, so the pet comes to associate the click with something good. Soon, the animal wants to hear the sound. When the pet learns its own actions can cause a click of approval, it will actively perform positive behaviour in hope of hearing the sound. You can add a verbal cue and the pet will start coming when called. “It is very exciting to see an animal experience the moment when it suddenly realizes it can actively control the clicker ‘game,’” says Pryor.

The ‘magic’ of the click comes from its clarity, consistency and precision. The sound should occur the moment the behaviour happens, so the pet knows exactly what it did right. It is not usually possible to deliver the treat itself with such precision, especially if the pet is in a cage or across the room. For example, an owner is trying to teach her pet rat to come to the door of its cage. It does so, but by the time the owner arrives with a food treat, the rat is frustrated with waiting and is chewing on the door. The owner gives the treat because the command was obeyed, but the animal associates the reward with chewing on the door. So, the owner has inadvertently taught her pet to chew on the door to get a treat!

Positive reinforcement

A positive reinforcer is something given to a pet to make it feel happy and repeat certain behaviour. This can be petting, freedom of movement or a chance to play with a favourite toy—but the strongest reinforcer for most pets is food. In clicker training, there are only two techniques to try to influence a pet’s behaviour. One is positive reinforcement; the other is to ignore undesirable behaviour. There are no physical corrections, punishment or scolding. Reinforced behaviour will become stronger, while ignored behaviour will fade away. If a pet is behaving very badly, you simply take the clicker and treats away, leaving the animal to sit alone and ponder the consequences.

Universality

There are clicker trainers around the world working with almost every conceivable captive species. The training works on pigs, rabbits, dolphins, birds, search and rescue (SAR) dogs, elephants, tigers, turtles and fish. Anyone can perform clicker training. Sometimes it works best to train in teams, with one person clicking and the other providing the treat. This is a good way for a new trainer to learn.

All kinds of small pets can be trained. Some learn more quickly, will work longer or get bored more easily than others, but any pet can be motivated by what it wants.

It may take a long time for the animal to get used to the click sound or to associate it with the treat. Some pets catch on right away—and some will even teach others of their kind.

For example, a ferret named Gwen learned from clicker training to touch a ball with her nose on command. The next day, she taught eight other ferrets the same trick.

This type of mimicry is quite common. A shy or reluctant pet may decide to participate after seeing another animal being clicker-trained.

Setting up

Many small pets feel uncomfortable outside their cage at first, but you can start training them in the cage. When you eventually do take your pet out of its cage, you need to ensure it cannot escape and should provide a box or house for it to hide in. Keep any larger pets away. Some pets are nocturnal, like chinchillas and hamsters, so the best training time will be in the evening.

Observing your pet's natural behaviour can help develop tricks. Use small pieces of treats your pet really likes. Never withhold food or water from small pets to make them hungry for training, as this could be fatal.

Target training

All pets can touch an object—such as a ping-pong ball attached to the end of a pencil—with their nose. This trick can lead to other lessons. To teach your pet to touch a target, hold the object in front of it or place it on the ground nearby. The pet and the object should start out in a very small, enclosed area, so the animal is bound to touch the object at some point. When your pet moves to investigate, click and treat. Repeat each time it moves closer to the target, until it actually touches it—then click and treat only for actual nose touches. Next, add the command word “touch” just as its nose touches the target. After a few training sessions, try giving this cue before the pet touches, to see if it has learned the word goes with the action. Also, try moving the target to see if your pet will follow to touch it. This may take several sessions. The more often you clicker-train, the faster your pet will learn new tricks, but each session should be no longer than five minutes.

Jumping through hoops

Jumping pets—including rabbits, degus and chinchillas—can be trained to jump through a hoop. Place the hoop so part of it touches the ground and in such a way that your pet must pass through it to get to you, a touch-target, its litter box or something else it wants to reach. Then click and treat as the animal passes through the hoop.

Raise the hoop slightly each time, clicking and treating as soon as the front legs go through. As the animal begins to jump higher, click as its front legs go through the hoop and treat after it lands. If your pet goes under or around or refuses to jump, lower the hoop to a point where the animal can succeed, then end the session. Start the next session at this height.

Fives and tens

Guinea pigs and many other small pets can be taught to give ‘five’ (*i.e.* place one paw on your finger) or ‘ten’ (*i.e.* place both paws on your hand). This trick also builds upon the initial target training. First, hold a target in the air, just out of your guinea pig’s reach. As the pet strives to touch it, one paw will come off the ground. Touch that paw with your finger in a miniature ‘high-five’ and click and treat. You may need a partner to help manage the target, the clicker and the treats. Soon, your guinea pig will realize placing its paw on your finger results in a click and treat. You can then start training the vocal cue, “high five,” to get your pet to deliberately respond with a paw on your finger. A rabbit can learn “gimme 10” in a similar way. First, hold the target high enough that the animal has to stand to reach it. Move the target forward until your rabbit is off balance and needs to lean both of its paws on your waiting hand. Click and treat for contact. Variations of this trick can be used to teach a rabbit to stand on cue and then hop forward on its hind legs.

Obstacle courses

Ferrets, hamsters, mice and rats love to climb and can be taught to follow a target up the ladder or ramp that comes with many pet cages. They can also be taught to go through a tunnel and to run a maze. An obstacle course can also include ‘jumps,’ platforms or anything your pet can move over, around, into, under or through. You can buy cage accessories at a pet store and/or make your own obstacles with items around the home. Teach your pet to navigate each obstacle separately, using the same methods as for jumping through a hoop. Start with low jumps, short ladders and short tunnels, then gradually increase their scale as your pet catches on and develops the skills and confidence for each obstacle. Once your pet knows how to navigate several obstacles, you can start ‘chaining’ them together. Begin by putting the one your pet likes best at the end of the course and then another one in front of it. Then you can start your pet off with either the first obstacle’s cue or a target cue. Each obstacle becomes reinforcement for the one that came before it. You can add obstacles one at a time ‘backwards’ to the beginning of the course. This way, your pet is always moving toward something for which it has already received lots of reinforcement. And if the chain of events falls apart in the middle, you will know exactly which part needs more work.

Finding success

The key to success with clicker training is understanding your pet—what it likes to eat, what behaviour it naturally exhibits and what environment it prefers. Consulting species-specific information resources will also help, particularly with regards to how to keep the animal healthy and what kinds of treats are most suitable. Click only once at a time. Always follow a click with a treat of high value to the animal. Increase difficulty in tiny increments. Keep training sessions short and quit while your pet is successful and left wanting more.