A person and dog with leashes

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**Chapter 18: Clicker Use & Targeting Exercise**

In this chapter, we will introduce and discuss the specifics of using a “clicker” as an event marker. We’ll go over the pros and cons of using a clicker versus a verbal marker, review the general guidelines for using event markers, then give details for a practical exercise in which you will learn how to teach your dog a new target.

The typical box clicker is a small rectangular device with an opening for your thumb that makes a distinct popping sound when depressed. There is also a button-style clicker that makes a similar sound but is made with a raised button that some individuals find easier to depress. Both clickers come with a coil that can be worn around the hand or wrist to keep the clicker conveniently available for use. The clicker should be held in the leash hand, not the food delivery hand. When you receive your clicker, please refrain from clicking it until instructed to do so.

Up until now, you have been using the verbal event marker “Yes!”. A verbal marker works well if used consistently and is convenient because it is always with you. However, it can be quite difficult to be 100% consistent with a verbal marker as it can get a little lost in regular conversation and is not as easy for the dog to recognize. The clicker functions in the same way, a bridge between behavior and reward, but provides a more unique, specific audible signal that the dog can easily recognize. The click is always followed by a food reward, and therefore holds a lot of power with the dogs. For this reason, the clicker can be especially useful when teaching new routes and behaviors or repatterning any trouble spots.

As with the verbal marker, the click should be given to mark the desired behavior, then you can reach for a treat. Timing becomes even more imperative when using the clicker. The dogs can learn very quickly, but it is also very easy to inadvertently teach them an undesirable behavior. Many dogs will get quite excited when doing clicker work and will start trying extra hard to earn rewards. As long as your timing is good, you can take advantage of this by marking and rewarding the dog’s efforts to do the right thing. However, if your timing is poor, your dog can easily become frustrated or confused. They may start throwing random behaviors in their effort to earn a reward or they may start to give up trying altogether. When working through the exercise at the end of this chapter, keep in mind that it may feel a little messy at first. Your dog might get overly excited, and you may find it challenging to handle the clicker in addition to leash and harness, especially while trying to focus on sequencing and timing. Don’t worry, your instructors will be there to help fine tune your technique and facilitate success for both you and your dog.

\*Reminders:

-The clicker is a 100% guarantee of food reward for the dog. Even if you hit the clicker by accident, you must follow it with a treat.

-Avoid pre-loading your hand with a treat. Use the click or “Yes!” to mark the desired behavior, then reach for the treat.

-Deliver food reward at the desired location. Your dog should not have to curl toward the treat pouch to receive food.

The following practical exercise will be done to practice using the clicker. We will describe, step-by-step, how to teach your dog to locate a chair. This basic technique can be used for teaching any target and can be done with a verbal marker as well. When teaching something like a chair target, keep in mind that while your dog may quickly learn to target this particular chair, it does not mean they can now locate an empty chair in any situation. You will need to repeat the exercise in dozens of different locations in order for your dog to begin to generalize the behavior.

**Teaching your dog a new target (Chair-clicker practice)**

This process utilizes the Touch Game. Before you begin, ensure that your dog will reliably touch your hand target.

**Step #1**

Stand in front of an empty chair, facing the chair with your dog at your left side. Place your hand target (closed fist) at the front edge of the chair as your give the verbal cue “Touch”. Mark with a click the moment your dog’s nose makes contact with your hand, then reward with food. You may notice that your dog is going for the touch as soon as your hand target comes out. Keep the sequence clean by giving the verbal cue first, then presenting your hand target. Keep in mind your fist should be placed where your dog can touch it without jumping. Repeat this step a few times before moving to the next step.

**Step #2**

Continue to repeat the above sequence with one small change. Without moving your feet, gently back your dog up with the leash between repetitions. This puts your dog in a position to step toward the chair as they go to touch your hand. Continue to click when your dog touches, then food reward each time. Don’t worry if your dog starts to anticipate and move toward the chair before you give the cue. This just shows that they are understanding the exercise.

**Step #3**

Next, you’ll want to give the new target a name (in this case “Chair”). At this point your dog has no idea what the new word means, so you’ll need to pair it with the behavior by stacking the new cue right BEFORE the cue that they already know. For example: “Chair” - “Touch” - Present hand target. Click and reward each time your dog targets your hand. Repeat a few times, then drop the verbal “Touch”. Continue pairing the word “Chair” with the presentation of your hand target. Repeat several times, gently resetting your dog after each repetition. At this point you should still be no more than one step from the chair.

**Step #4**

Add a small pause between the new cue “Chair” and the presentation of your hand target. Notice if your dog starts moving toward the chair when you give the verbal cue. If they are, then you’re ready to move onto the next step. If not, continue pairing with a short pause until you notice the anticipation. The sequence should go something like this: “Chair” - (pause) - Present hand target – Click – Food reward - Reset

**Step #5**

Once your dog begins responding to the new cue word, it is time to start building some distance. Take one extra step back as you reset your dog between repetitions. Allow your dog to move toward the target even if you haven’t had time to give the cue. Repeat this a few times using only the leash and moving no more than two steps away from the target until you can establish a good sequence: “Chair” - (Dog moves toward target) - Present hand target at chair – Click – Food reward – Reset

**Step #6**

When your dog is reliably moving toward the target on leash, it’s time to try picking up the harness. Start no more than 2-3 steps from the target. Try to scoop up the harness handle as quickly and smoothly as you can and be ready for your dog to move toward the target. At this point you will also begin using the standard targeting phrase “To the” as part of your cue. When your dog approaches the target in harness, your hand target becomes a confirmation that you have arrived at the desired location. Always confirm this before marking with a click and food reward. Repeat several times at a short distance, then build even more by resetting a few steps farther back. Finished sequence should look something like this: Scoop up harness handle - “To the Chair” - (dog works to chair and stops) - Reach down to confirm location – Present fist for dog to touch – Click – Food reward – Reset. Always set the harness handle down to reset. The dog should only work toward the target to help avoid confusion.

***Troubleshooting Tips:***

If at any point you find that your dog is not responding successfully, simply go back to the previous steps and make the task easier until your dog can be successful. Give them several good repetitions to build up understanding before attempting to advance to the next step.

Remember to offer plenty of praise and encouragement throughout the entire exercise. Even if you find yourself getting a bit frustrated trying to learn a new skill, it’s important that you stay positive and keep your dog engaged.

Some dogs may try various behaviors as they figure out exactly what it is you are targeting. You may observe dogs sitting, going into a down, backing up, touching you with their paw, putting their front paws up on the chair, or in some cases actually getting up on the chair. Don’t be concerned as this is normal behavior. Be patient and reward only the desired behavior. The other behaviors should disappear once your dog understands the task.

If your dog is too overly excited and driving toward the target before you are ready, you can use the command “Wait” to ask them to be a bit more patient. Avoid having the dog sit or stay as this may diminish drive.

If you find that your dog is not so motivated or has trouble staying engaged, a higher value reward may help to accelerate the process.

Avoid using leash corrections when teaching new targets. This can diminish drive and will likely confuse the dog. Use only gentle leash cues when resetting your dog between repetitions.

Remember that your dog will need lots of repetitions to understand new targets. Take time to work with your dog throughout the day, in different locations, and approaching targets from different directions. Reinforce any target you encounter (doors, chairs, etc.) by repeating the cue word and having your dog Touch at the location. Mark and reward each touch.