

Training: to Clicker or not to Clicker?

What is a clicker? A clicker is a small device that makes a quick, consistent noise. It provides the dog with information. If a reward is consistently provided following a click of the clicker, you can successfully communicate to your dog that a click means a reward. Once your dog understands that, then you can click at the moment your dog provides the behavior you're looking for. Your dog will understand pretty quickly what you want him/her to do.

Why use a clicker? Training is definitely possible without a clicker. Eventually your dog will understand what you want if you provide some kind of positive response to the requested behavior. The clicker, however, helps you to train your dog more quickly, and with less frustration on the part of your dog (and you!). It allows you to catch the very moment when your dog does the right thing and clearly tell your dog 'that was right'!

If you are using treats as a reward, the clicker allows you to get the behavior you want without showing your dog a treat. Some dogs learn that they should obey when they see a treat bag, otherwise nothing is in it for them. But a clicker trained dog never knows when a treat is coming, because you can carry the clicker with you and leave the treats in the kitchen. As long as you go and get the treat after the click (according to Pavlov you actually have over 20 minutes but try to get to it within 5), your dog will still associate click with treat. So your dog will get used to following your commands whether they see a treat or not.

If you want to eventually teach your dog complicated tricks, the clicker is the way to go, because with it you can shape behavior. For example, if you'd like your dog to run and get a toy and drop it in a certain box, you can first start clicking when the dog runs toward the toy. When he or she understands that, you can wait to click until they put the toy in their mouth. Next wait to click until they run with the toy toward the box. Finally wait to click until the final desired behavior has been accomplished. With enough patience, you can teach your dog almost any behavior with this method.