

Clicker Training for Shelter Puppies

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In the literature

Dorey NR, Blandina A, Udell MAR. Clicker training does not enhance learning in mixed-breed shelter puppies (*Canis familiaris*). *J Vet Behav*. 2020;39:57-63.

FROM THE PAGE ...

This study investigated the efficacy of 3 positive reinforcement methods (ie, food reward only, clicker reinforcement followed by food reward, praise reinforcement followed by food reward) in the training of training-naïve shelter puppies.

A previous study showed that positive reinforcement (ie, offering a reward for a correct response to a command) is associated with the development of fewer unwanted behaviors in dogs.¹ Pet owners are typically more comfortable using reward-based training. Use of clickers has also become an increasingly popular training method in several species. Clickers and praise are often considered to work as a bridge, in that these give immediate feedback that the animal's response was correct while allowing the trainer time to reach for and offer a food reward. Clickers can offer a more consistent sound than is possible with the variability of tone and inflection of the human voice. However, laboratory-based studies have not shown animals learn faster when either clickers or praise are used in addition to traditional food-based reinforcement.²⁻⁴ This finding may be the result of a highly competent trainer administering the tests, as the trainer's ability to quickly provide the food reinforcement might negate the need for a "bridge."

This study found that puppies receiving clicker reinforcement followed by a food reward did not do better (and, in some cases, did worse) in learning a new task than puppies receiving positive reinforcement from food alone. Food is considered a primary reinforcer—something that is necessary for life. Sounds (eg, clickers, voice) are secondary reinforcers that need a learned connection

with something positive (eg, food). The study's finding is consistent with an earlier study that found food, but not stroking or praise, shortened the time taken to respond to a command in the early stages of training.⁵

... TO YOUR PATIENTS

Key pearls to put into practice:

- 1** Puppies may not be ready to make the connection between use of secondary (eg, clickers) and primary (eg, food) reinforcers.
- 2** Owners with puppies should be encouraged to use food rewards in training. Although it may be possible for some puppies to respond to social rewards (eg, praise) with the same enthusiasm as to food rewards, this is likely the exception.
- 3** Secondary reinforcers may be more successful when used in the training of older dogs.

References

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