

What is positive reinforcement?

In simple dog training terms, positive reinforcement means that you give your dog a reward when he does a behavior you like, which has the effect of strengthening (or increasing the rate of) that behavior. For instance, if a dog sits and then you promptly give him a food treat, he will be more likely to sit again, hoping to earn another food treat.

Remember ... positive reinforcement makes a behavior more likely to occur again.

Why do we use a clicker?

The clicker is a valuable tool because it allows you to 'mark' a desired behavior the exact moment it occurs. It's like taking a snapshot at exactly the right moment. The clicker instantly tells the dog that he is doing something we like, and also lets him know that a reward is coming. Good timing and clear communication allow the dog to learn quickly.

How do we introduce the clicker?

Hold the clicker at your side or waist, press it once, and *then* deliver a treat to the dog. (Ideally, the treat should be delivered within a second after the click.) By closely pairing the click sound with a treat, the dog soon becomes excited when he hears the click because he knows something wonderful will follow. This is called classical conditioning. During the pairing process, the dog does not have to be doing any particular behavior for you. You're just creating a positive association with that click sound.

Once you see your dog becomes excited each time he hears the click sound, you can use the clicker to 'mark' desired behaviors. Pay attention to your dog and watch for any desirable behavior that he may offer. When you see it, click it. Essentially, you are telling the dog, "Yes! You're doing a good job!" And then promptly follow the click with a treat.

What kind of treats/rewards should you use?

You know your dog best, so use a variety of rewards that are very meaningful to him. Basically, these rewards are his 'pay check' for doing a good job. (Both [Fido Refined](#) and [The How of Bow Wow](#) demonstrate the use of a variety of reinforcers.) Some reward ideas are:

- Tiny, tasty food treats (like soft & meaty dog treats, hotdog slivers, bits of chicken or cheese, freeze-dried liver, etc.)
- Toy play
- Petting and attention (But be aware this is not a high-value reward to many dogs!)

Why is the clicker better than just using verbal praise?

The click sound is unique, QUICK, clear, easily repeated, and non-emotional. It allows you to mark exactly the behavior you like.

Verbal praise alone is less effective than a clicker because we use words so much every day and thus their impact tends to get watered down. We also risk reinforcing the wrong behavior because we cannot say words with the same quickness and precision as the clicker.

Some dogs are overly sensitive to the click sound so, if needed, other signals can be used to mark good performances (like a whistle, a mouth "cluck" or a simple, short word like "yes!" or "yip!")

How to 'get' behaviors:

When you're first teaching a new behavior, resist the temptation to give a cue right from the beginning. (After all, dogs don't speak English!) Practice for a few sessions, just clicking & treating your dog whenever he offers a particular behavior you'd like to see more of. Some simple behaviors may be offered in their complete form right away, like a SIT or a DOWN.

In other cases, you might use a treat for a few reps to help lure the dog into a desired position. As he's doing the behavior you like, click and then treat him.

For a more complicated behavior, you might have to "shape" it in small, step-by-step increments. ([The Shape of Bow Wow DVD](#) provides detailed information about this teaching technique.)

When you click/treat a behavior you desire, the dog quickly figures out this is a behavior that pays off, and he'll start offering it to you more frequently in order to *cause* you to click and treat! When he's able to offer the behavior reliably and with ease, NOW you can attach a cue to this behavior.

Adding the cue:

The most common types of cues used in dog training are *verbal cues* (ex: 'sit' or 'come') and *hand signals* (ex: pointing towards the floor when you want him to lie down).

When first introducing a new cue to your dog, give the cue just before you expect the behavior is going to occur anyway. As the dog does the behavior, click it, and then treat. Repeat about 10 times, so he learns this new association, i.e. *this 'cue' now means I should do this behavior*. ([The Shape of Bow Wow](#) offers helpful suggestions for adding cues and teaching your dog to respond reliably to them.)

Improving your dog's performance:

During the teaching process, you should always be looking for ways to raise your standards. In other words, when the dog demonstrates a basic understanding of a behavior, you then want him to work harder for his click/treat by carefully selecting only the better performances to reward. ([The How of Bow Wow](#) covers this topic in great detail.) For instance, once the dog learns a basic SIT, you may want to raise your standards in the following areas. (Just be sure to

work on

one point at a time.)

- The SIT must occur immediately after one cue is given.
- The actual position of the SIT must be neat and precise.
- The SIT must be of a longer duration (i.e. building a SIT-STAY).
- The dog must respond to the SIT cue around distractions and in new locations.

Once your dog has achieved the final, polished version of a skill, you won't need to use the clicker for that behavior anymore. (The clicker is just used in the teaching process to improve the precision of your communication and thus speed up your training.) You might surprise the dog occasionally with a treat for performing a well-known skill, and remember there are many 'life rewards' you can dole out every day for good behavior, like petting, access through doors, playtime, walks, car rides, etc.

Using the clicker correctly:

- Click (only once!) while the behavior is occurring. Let the sound of the clicker stand alone and *then* promptly reach in to deliver a reward to your dog.
- Make sure the reward you use is valuable to YOUR dog.
- Training sessions should be short, fun, and held in various locations.
- Be patient. If the dog suddenly seems confused or has trouble with a skill (especially if you begin to practice somewhere new), go back to a simpler version of the skill in order to help your dog be successful. Then gradually increase the skill's difficulty.