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Your Smart Dog

The Power of Teaching – Ideas from Clicker Expo

April 2008

From prison inmates to beluga whales, the power of clicker training is undeniable. I spent three days in Kentucky attending my fifth Clicker Expo conference - an event dedicated to the science and the application of clicker training in different environments.

Clicker Expo attracts mainly dog trainers, but horse trainers, zookeepers, and teachers and coaches (for humans) also attend to find out about advances in the science. This was an exciting year for Clicker Expo. Seventy percent of the attendees had never attended an Expo before - more people are learning that clicker training is the easiest and fastest way to teach both animals and people.

Each year, I generate lots of new and exciting ideas as a result of Clicker Expo. This month's newsletter will give you ideas you can use with your own dog (or family, or co-worker).

Dogs + Cats + Horses + More!

The beauty of clicker training is that it works on just about every species and it doesn't matter if that animal is bigger or smaller than you, strong or fragile, flighty or rock solid. I watched a marine mammal trainer teach beluga whales to blow "air rings" (think smoke rings) on cue to amuse aquarium visitors. The belugas blew these air rings naturally, but not on a predictable schedule. The trainers needed the whales to do it at precise times.

The sky is the limit for what you can teach - if you can think it up, you can teach your dog to do it.

Clicker training was the tool that the trainers used to teach the whales when to blow those air rings. Old fashioned training that relies on corrections

(punishment) wouldn't have worked - how do you punish an animal you can't put a leash on? An animal that can sink to the bottom of the tank if he doesn't want to play anymore? Clicker training helped the whales learn quickly what the trainers wanted. **More importantly, both the trainers and the whales had fun** - blowing air rings was like a game for them. It doesn't get any better than that: the whales, the trainers, and the public had **fun**.

The takeaway: Want to teach your dog to do something fun, cool, or really useful? Sign up for a course, get your clicker, and you *and your dog* will be having fun and learning together. **The sky is the limit for what you can teach - if you can think it up, you can teach your dog to do it.** Don't have a dog? Clicker training works on horses, cats, goats, guinea pigs, and fish (yes, fish - I saw video of a clicker trained fish at Expo!).

Husbands + Wives + Kids + Co-Workers In Central Virginia, an innovating and amazing program pairs prison inmates with shelter dogs. These aren't white-collar criminals, we're talking "lifers," and people who have committed serious crimes. The inmates are taught the principles of clicker training and then given a shelter dog to train to improve the dog's chances of adoption.

Poor choices and violence are why the people are in prison - the principles of clicker training are counter to their way of life. Clicker training relies on positive reinforcement - not only recognizing good behavior, but marking that behavior and reinforcing it. This is hard stuff for these people - they're used to bullying their way through life. If you want it, just take it.

If these inmates do their time and then re-enter society without gaining new skills, it's only a



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matter of time before they are right back where they started – prison again. **This program arms the prisoners with knowledge and then the prisoners use that knowledge to teach the shelter dogs “good dog” behaviors** like sit to greet, walk nicely on a leash, and generally prep them for their new home. The shelter dogs then have a better chance of being adopted because they have good manners. **The inmates are learning about compassion, unconditional love from the dogs,** and are making a positive impact by helping save the lives of these dogs who might otherwise be euthanized.

The prison training program requires that the inmates take full responsibility for the dog 24 hours a day, develop and implement a training plan (with detailed record-keeping), and that they work together with one another. **This program is about more than just training dogs – the inmates develop social skills, responsibility, teamwork, record-keeping and organizational skills. And, more importantly, they’re learning how to get what they want without force. They learn to look for things that are good, not things that are bad. They’re learning a new way to look at life, a new way to interact with people. It’s truly amazing...**

The presenter showed an interview with a former inmate who was involved in the program while he was in prison. He spoke eloquently about what he’d learned and the value of the program. In the video, he revealed that after his release, he became a dog trainer. He even attended the Clicker Expo to further his education and new career.

The takeaway: Clicker training is about more than just teaching dogs to sit. The principles of clicker training are at work in our lives every day and in every interaction. Take those principles and apply them in your own life. The better you understand them, the better you can apply them. Read *What Shamu Taught Me About Life, Love, and Marriage* by Amy Sutherland.

Other Cool Stuff

I returned home from Clicker Expo with a boatload of ideas for my own dogs and for classes. Here are some of the things I’ll be trying with my dogs and/or introducing as courses:

- Mission Impossible: Retrieving a Hot Dog (without eating it on the way back!)
- New Ways to Stuff a Kong for Your Dog’s Enjoyment and Enrichment
- Games You + Your Dog Can Play With Different Scents
 - Lemon = Sit or
 - Mint = Down
 - You could amaze your guest by telling your dog to find the person having lemon (or mint or whatever) tea!
- Improving or Changing Your Cues to Your Dog (how to get your dog to do things with a new signal)
 - Instead of “sit” meaning sit hind end on ground, a “thumbs up” motion could mean sit hind end on ground.
 - Instead of “come” meaning run to me, you could change it to “here.”
 - Can your dog sit if you say “sit” while you are jumping up and down?
 - While you are facing the opposite direction?
 - From a trot?
 - At a distance?
 - Under the table?
 - On top of the table?

Every year, I return from Clicker Expo energized to do more with my dogs. I’m also usually exhausted from packing so much learning into three days! Tired or not, I’m ready to get out there and work with my dogs! If you’re ready to do more with your dogs, let me know – I might just develop a new course for you!

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