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The new magazine for dog training

# TEACHING DOGS

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**POSITIVE LEARNING FOR POSITIVE RESULTS**

# Why Clicker Training for Service Dogs ?

DEBI DAVIS & BARBARA HANDELMAN

*Some trainers credit the scalpel-like accuracy of clicker training to quickly teach complex tasks. Others appreciate the dog's enthusiasm for the process of learning. Many trainers applaud clicker training for teaching a dog how to problem solve.*



*Barbara's partner, Luca, emptying the dryer.*

For the end user - the person with a disability - clicker training encourages dogs that are highly skilled at problem solving, which may be the most liberating reason of all; it offers people with high level physical disabilities a "hands off" way to teach new skills to their assistance dog partners. It also helps them to maintain the skills the dog has already learned.

After 20 years of traditional dog training the authors believed their dog training days would end with the decline in health. They could no longer physically direct-lure, position dogs with their hands nor apply leash corrections. How on

earth could they train service dogs when their physical abilities were so limited?

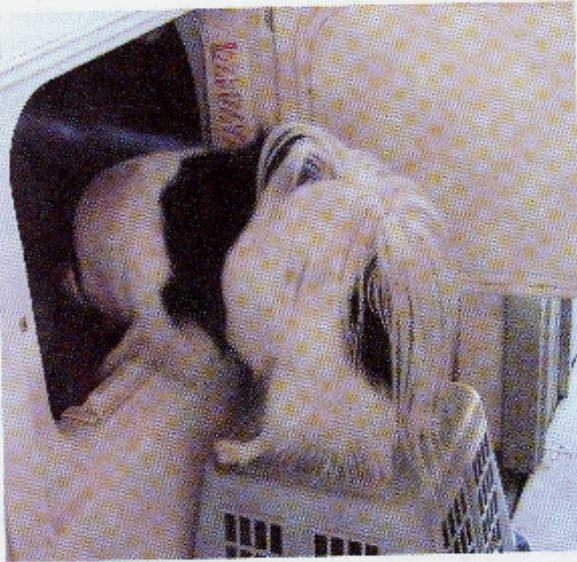
Clicker training enabled a continuation of their training and brought an additionally bonus of increased levels of skill and reliability even though their physical skills were deteriorating.

Clicker trained dogs are not afraid to make a mistake, there is no correction associated because "mistakes" are not avoided by the trainer but seen as a source of information for the dog. Rather than depending on the trainer's direct guidance, non-directed clicker training (free shaping) teaches dogs to use their creativity when presented with baffling challenges and find the solution that works.

Free shaping captures a behavior offered by the dog without any lures or prompts. The favorite free shaping game is "101 things to do with an object," where the dog offers interactions with any object put before him; a box, a brush, a pencil, a plastic bottle will work.

The dog might sniff the box, push it with his nose, open his mouth and try to pull it, lick it, jump inside it, kick it, paw it, tip it over, or jump on top of the tipped over box. Any single offered behavior can be reinforced each time the dog offers it.

Dogs learn that solving problems is fun



*"Do you want it ironed or folded?"  
Debi's partner, Peek*

and rewarding - that 'good things' happen when they press through a bit of frustration to find a solution.

### **How are problem solving games relevant to service work?**

Once the dog becomes proficient at problem solving, learning other useful tasks and skills become easier for the dog. Long complicated tasks are taught very incrementally, in "baby" steps. Each of the tiny steps are then linked together to form a 'behavior chain.'

Daily, our dogs performs several complex tasks. Making the bed is a favorite. Debi has a very small toy breed service dog. In order perform this task he works on top of the bed. He jumps up on the bed, moves to the head of the bed, grasps the bed covers with his mouth, and backs up while pulling them to the front of the bed. He then drags each pillow to the head of the bed, and the only thing Debi has to do is adjust their placement a bit, and straighten out the top of the covers.

The bed making behavior was shaped by initially teaching the dog to offer a steady tug and hold, then to back up while tugging. To make it easier for the dog, the sheet is pinned to the quilt with baby diaper pins so that the dog only has to pull one cover, not two.

Large dogs learn to make the bed by tugging in a forward moving position, from rear to front, on both sides of the bed.

Daily chores such as doing laundry or bringing in the groceries require reaching, stretching bending, tugging and balance, which can be difficult for people with physical disabilities. Helping with these tasks can be enjoyable for service dogs to learn and perform.

Dogs can learn to drop clothing into top loader machines but getting out the wet clothing is not really an option.

For those fortunate enough to have front-loading washing machines, the dog can learn to do everything except pour in the soap and turn the knobs to the desired setting.

The dog learns first to tug open the washer door, to pick up the dirty clothing from the basket and place it inside the washer, then close the door. When the clothes are washed, the dog opens the door, tugs the wet clothing from the machine and drops it into a laundry basket.

The dog then opens the dryer door, positions himself between the door and basket, and transfers the wet clothing to the dryer, and closes the door.

When the clothing is dry, the dog opens the door, tugs out each piece, drops it into a basket or gives it to the handler to fold. The dog may also be asked to tug the basket around the house, as the person puts away each piece of folded clothing.

Small dogs may be limited tugging very heavy wet items, such as bath towels, denim jeans and sweaters but can use a low stool or box to jump on and then move into the machine to get the items at the far back of the washer and dryer.

Complex behavior chains involved in helping with laundry require the dog to have learned to tug, to push with paws, to fetch objects, carry objects, and to release objects in a specified place. Fortunately, clicker training makes learning complex chains of behaviors very simple for the dog, and very easy for the physically disabled trainer to teach in a totally hands-off way.

A service dog can be shaped to do ATM (Automatic Bank Teller Machine) tasks.

The dog stands in a paws-up position on the ATM machine, pushes the card into the slot, and pulls it out. The dog can also retrieve money from the machine.

Tasks requiring a pincer grasp can be difficult or impossible for people with a high level of paralysis, limited hand strength or manual dexterity. Pushing the buttons is the easy part for the human - a mouth stick can be used quite simply, but pushing that card in a narrow slot can be next to impossible.

Service dogs need to be able to adapt their learning to different situations. Not all ATM machines are identical or in identical settings. Once the basic sequences of behaviours is taught our super problem solvers will adapt them to the requirements of the new situation.

### **Clicker training allows teaching from a fixed position**

When handlers have little mobility, they can teach the dog to do behaviors close up and at a distance away. The handler can train an entire chain of behaviors without ever leaving a fixed position. Working at a distance, for example, is shaped by teaching the dog to target an object which is moved incrementally farther and farther away.

Targeting taught from a fixed position can be used for directional behaviors, such as moving right or left, or for learning body pivoting and circling. Targeting also allows the disabled handler a way to exercise the dog in adverse weather or health crises. Targeting from a fixed position allows the dog to be "lunged" like a horse, in a circle, moving both clockwise and counterclockwise around the handler.

Dogs who have learned to retrieve balls and toys can also be exercised from a fixed position. Balls can be thrown on the

flat, over hilly terrain, and up staircases. Lunging and playing ball offer the dog aerobic exercise, muscle toning and an entertaining release from the rigors of service dog training and work.

From a fixed position, dogs can learn to discriminate one object from another and go into different rooms to find those objects. Searching through the house for an object enhances the dog's problem solving skills; offering a vehicle for mental, physical and emotional fitness.

Service dogs perform tasks that increase their person's independence and safety. Some non-service dogs are also being taught to do helpful tasks around the house. After a long and busy day of work, it's terrific to have a dog fetch a can of soda, reading glasses, a book, slippers or the TV remote controls.

Clicker training allows dog handlers to teach their dogs helpful tasks that make life easier for family members and are entertaining and rewarding for the dog.

No matter how much the human partner's health status changes, clicker training allows handlers to maintain their dog's high skill level, and continue training new tasks, as needed, throughout the dog's life.

Albert Einstein said: "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."

In clicker training, we provide the conditions in which dogs learn quickly, effectively, and with great precision, of their own volition. Lifelong learning becomes a happy and stress-free choice for the dog.

Both Debi and Barbara are online and able to provide training advice or give local contacts:

Debi - [scripio@azstarnet.com](mailto:scripio@azstarnet.com)

Barbara - [Barbara.Handelman@Volley.Net](mailto:Barbara.Handelman@Volley.Net)

### **For a service dog, problem solving skills can mean the difference between life and death for the human partner**

Returning home from a party late one night a clicker trained service dog was in the car with his handler, Judy. A fire blew out and the car careened into the ditch on a deserted road. Friends at the party had stashed Judy's backpack in the trunk of the car, rather than the back seat, where it was normally kept. The backpack held the cell phone.

Judy opened the door, rolled out of the car into the ditch, and cued her dog to her side. Living with a high level of paralysis made crawling impossible, so she had to rely on her dog's ability to problem solve in order to get help.

Judy's only tools were a few bits of old dried beef jerky in her jacket pocket and the clicker on her key ring. She shaped her dog to move toward the driver's door, do a 'paws-up' position on the seat, then touch and press the trunk release button on the dashboard.

She then shaped the dog to move to the rear of the car, do a paws-up on the bumper, jump into the trunk, and find the cell phone. The dog knew only the cue words 'cell phone,' and knew where the phone was kept in her backpack. As the dog attempted to tug the backpack to Judy, the strap caught on the tire jack and the pack wouldn't budge.

The dog eventually tugged the zipper down with his teeth just far enough to get his nose inside the pack and retrieve the cell phone.

# TEACHING DOGS

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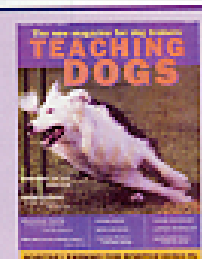
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