

Clicker Training Your Rabbit

By Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin

What goes Hop...Click, Hop...Click? Why, a clicker bunny of course! Clicker bunnies are happily hopping over jumps, running through tunnels, tossing toys and generally having fun with their people all over the country. According to clicker pioneer Karen Pryor, "Clicking with bunnies brightens their lives, exercises their surprisingly lively minds, and brings out their endearing personalities. They'll LOVE training you to click and treat! It's easy to learn, and mentally and physically enriching for house rabbits AND their affectionate owners". If you would like to engage in more activities with your rabbit, improve aspects of your rabbit's behavior, clip its nails without a fight or simply enhance your relationship with the rabbit, then you will want to find out more about clicker training.

Clicker training is a marker-based system of teaching in which a click sound is used to indicate to the rabbit that a desired action has been performed. The precision and consistency of the click sound make this a far superior approach to the use of food without a marker or to the use of a verbal marker. The click is always followed closely with a tangible reward (such as a food treat) so that the rabbit comes to associate the click with something desirable. Soon the click becomes a positive reinforcer for the rabbit and it will begin to try to elicit a click and treat from you. "It is very exciting to see an animal experience the 'Aha!' moment when it suddenly realizes that it can actively control the clicker game", said Karen Pryor.

The clicker can be used to mark all sorts of different behaviors. In the case of a shy rabbit the click can be simply to mark eye contact or a slight movement toward the handler. Andrea Bratt Frick and Jean Silva of B.U.N.S. in California have had great success with the clicker and their shelter rabbits. "Once you get started and learn how to use the clicker, you and your rabbit become 'hooked'. It is simple to use, and the results are so powerful! We have been using the clicker to get all our bunnies to come to the front of their condos to appear friendly to help them become more adoptable. Also, we have taught them little tricks such as 'give me ten' so that the bunnies, (who were fearful at first) would now interact with potential adoptees". Bunnies that are already outgoing and fun-loving enjoy performing tricks and running obstacle courses to earn their clicks and treats.

Getting Started

To begin with clicker training all you need is a clicker (or anything that makes a consistent sharp sound) and something that your rabbit wants and that you can readily provide. Food is the easiest to deliver and most powerful reward for most rabbits, but toys, attention, freedom or access to a special box can also work with some bunnies. To identify the best reward for your rabbit, just observe and see what makes it happy. A happy bunny responds with ears pricked forward and the inside of the ear facing to the front. It may flick its ears or even give a joyful binky. A rabbit that lays its ears flat, holds the inside of the ears to the side or the back, holds one ear up and one down, turns its back on you or flicks its feet while going away from you is not impressed with your offering. A good way to identify favorite food treats is to offer a mixture in a bowl and see which are chosen first. Many rabbits will work for pelleted feed. Be sure that the rabbit has free access to ample hay at all times and reserve other favorite foods for training sessions. The best treats to use for clicker training are small and able to be consumed quickly. The higher the rate of reinforcement is, the more satisfying the training session will be for both you and the rabbit. Rabbits can become bored easily, so try to use several different treats in each session.

At first the click must come almost simultaneously with the treat to build the association between click and treat. Click and give the rabbit a treat. The treat can be placed on the ground if the rabbit does not yet take food from your hand. As soon as the rabbit picks up the food, click. It will not take long for the rabbit to get the idea. After a few clicks and treats, wait for the rabbit to do something, take a step, look at you, move a paw... any movement and then click and treat. The click must occur at the exact moment that the bunny performs the movement that is being marked. Rabbits are prey animals and we believe that that they learn quickly and do not over analyze since their survival depends on rapid learning. You will soon find that your rabbit begins to try to repeat behaviors that earned a click and a treat and the game is on!

Finding the Right Reward

“We had a bunny at our shelter that we couldn’t get near because it was so fearful” said Andrea Bratt Frick of B.U.N.S. What did this bunny want the most? It wanted the humans to ‘go away’. So, that’s what Andrea used as the reward at first. She clicked and went away if the bunny came closer to the front of the condo. The rabbit learned to trust Andrea and the clicker. Soon she was able to introduce food as a reward. It’s up to the handler to decide what the bunny really wants as a reward and start from there. Some rabbits love a good ‘tug of war’ game as a reward, while

others enjoy a grooming session. All rabbits are different and observation is the key to understanding what your bunny would like the most.

Adding a Cue

A cue is anything that tells the rabbit what you want it to do in order to receive the click and treat. A cue can be a word, a hand signal or anything that the rabbit can discriminate. Once a rabbit is reliably offering a behavior, a cue can be added at the same time as the behavior is happening. For example if you have placed a low jump between the rabbit and its litter box and the rabbit jumps over the jump in order to get to the box, you can click during the jump (and treat when the rabbit lands) to indicate that this is desired behavior. When the jumping is happening reliably you can start saying the word jump as the rabbit jumps and then before the jump. Now you have a rabbit that jumps in response to the verbal cue “jump” and you can begin to make the jumps higher or longer or add more jumps to the sequence. You could introduce a tunnel before the jump and teach the cue “through the tunnel”. Once the rabbit learns various cues it can be directed to various obstacles.

Shaping Behaviors

The process of incrementally developing a behavior one step at a time is called shaping. Clicker training can be used to shape behaviors by raising the criteria required for the rabbit to receive a click. For example, in teaching a rabbit to jump, the first step may be just to place the bar on the ground and to click if the rabbit crosses over it. Placing the bar in between the rabbit and its litter box or food source are ways to increase the chance that the rabbit will cross the bar. Once the rabbit has received several clicks for crossing the bar, the height can be raised and clicks received only when the bar is not knocked off. In this way higher and higher jumps can be shaped. In shaping and indeed in all aspects of clicker training, mistakes are ignored and not punished. If the rabbit makes too many mistakes and does not receive a click three times in a row, then the criteria should be lowered temporarily to ensure success and to prevent frustration. Once a rabbit becomes frustrated it may turn its back, or thump the ground and that is the end of the training session. Rabbits are very intolerant of any perceived incompetence or unfairness on the part of the trainer!

Fading the Clicker and Treats

Every time the rabbit hears a click it must receive a treat. This establishes a bond of trust with the trainer. It is not necessary to use the clicker forever, though. Once a behavior has been learned and a cue has been established, the clicker can be faded by using it less frequently and then only intermittently to keep the behavior strong. There should be no rush to fade out the clicks and treats. The longer a behavior has been reinforced the stronger it will be and the less likely it will be to weaken and disappear. If one day the rabbit seems to have forgotten everything it has ever learned, just go back to the beginning and start again. Suddenly everything will come back, and more quickly than the first time.

What Can Rabbits Learn with Clicker Training?

Rabbits can learn to do anything that it is physically possible for them to do. The easiest things to teach a rabbit are based on things that it does naturally. Hopping, of course, is the behavior most closely associated with bunnies and you can certainly teach your bunny to hop over, around and through obstacles. You can even add a voice cue so as to be able to show off to your friends and family the true genius of your rabbit. Other natural behaviors that can be encouraged, enhanced and put on cue with clicker training include standing on hind legs, flinging of objects, grooming and flopping. Once the rabbit and trainer are adept at the clicker game, rabbits can learn to toss a ball with their paws, give a high five, carry objects in their mouths, push balls or toy cars with their noses and more.

How Are Rabbits Different from Other Species?

Rabbits are a prey species and this makes them very different from predators such as dogs and cats. Rabbits cannot afford to make many mistakes and must learn quickly. They also must be vigilant and comfortable in their environment before they can begin to learn. Rabbits need ample time to explore and to feel safe. Sometimes it takes a few minutes and sometimes a few sessions before a rabbit will even begin to consider taking a food treat in an environment outside its condo. Providing a non-slip training surface and access to a litter box is a great way to help a rabbit adjust to being on the outside. These comfort items can be taken to other locations to give the rabbit the confidence to work anywhere.

Unlike dogs and cats, rabbits are not naturally curious about items that you may have in your hand. They are foragers and will be most likely to explore an item placed on the ground at first. They are not inclined to follow moving objects and may appear to completely forget about something that is moved, even slightly. They cannot see objects that are directly in front and close to them because of the placement of their eyes. If you would like to teach a rabbit to touch an object and subsequently to follow that object, start with something fairly wide, like a margarine lid placed on the ground. Click and treat for approaches and then touches to the lid. Introduce the voice cue “touch” when the rabbit is reliably touching the object. Once the rabbit touches on command, then you can begin to hold the lid in your hand in front of the rabbit and ask for a touch. Then you can move the object and soon the rabbit will follow in order to touch it and receive and click and treat. Now you have a means of directing the rabbit and leading it and this target method can be used to move the rabbit over jumps, around obstacles and even to teach it to come when called.

Most rabbits are small compared to dogs and cats and so can eat less food in a training session. They do not store food in a pantry as do mice and other rodents, so it is important to keep training sessions short and make the most of the treats that can be dispensed in one session. The digestive system of a rabbit is very sensitive and must operate continuously, so food cannot be withheld to ensure that the rabbit is hungry at training time. Rabbits cannot tolerate major dietary changes and so new foods and sugary treats such as raisins must be used judiciously, perhaps to reward a particularly stellar performance or to appease a sulking rabbit.

Can Any Rabbit Learn?

Rabbits of all ages can benefit from clicker training. Feral and baby rabbits can learn to accept and enjoy handling and all aspects of husbandry, including nail trimming. Patience, good treats and practice with the clicker are all that is required. Even in busy households, where time is short and schedules are hectic, pet bunnies can be trained in short sessions of 5-10 minutes at a time. Clicker training is mentally tiring for bunnies and short sessions are a must.

Is My Rabbit a Slow Learner?

Rabbits show an extraordinary range of acceptance and aptitude for clicker training. Some rabbits get the idea with only a few clicks in the very first session and some take longer. The less experience a rabbit has had with different foods and different social situations, the longer

it may take for the rabbit to try new foods or to become comfortable with handling or being outside its condo. The key to success with shy or fearful bunnies is patience. Some rabbits are afraid of the click sound itself. This can be alleviated by using a quieter clicker such as the i-click, or by muffling the sound with a cloth wrapped round the clicker at first. A good way to introduce the clicker is to click each time any hay or other food is placed into the cage for a few days. You will know when the rabbit is catching on when it flicks its ears, or looks at you expectantly when it hears the clicker or sees you coming with the clicker. Some rabbits will thump with annoyance when you leave and take the clicker. Once your rabbit starts offering behaviors intentionally and looking at you as if to say “is this it? How about this?” you will know that it is a clicker bunny and you can move on to teaching advanced bunny skills and chaining behaviors together.

Solving Behavior Problems

Unfortunately many rabbits wind up in shelters as a result of behavior problems. The clicker has been invaluable in rehabilitating these misfit bunnies and making them adoptable. Ernie, a tiny Netherlands Dwarf bunny, had been passed through five different homes in as many years. When one of the authors rescued him from Rabbit Rescue in Ontario Canada, he was emotionally distraught. Ernie suffered from separation anxiety and also had developed a bad habit of biting for attention. Ernie had spent five years garnering attention by biting and this behaviour was eliminated in a few weeks using clicker training. This was accomplished gradually by clicking and feeding Ernie through the bars of his condo to prevent any biting. Once Ernie learned to associate hands approaching with the click, he was able to accept petting – a substitute for social grooming in the mind of a rabbit. Eventually Ernie reciprocated the grooming and began to lick a preferred hand. This was rewarded with a click and treat and soon Ernie was giving kisses in response to a verbal cue. So now Ernie is the kissing bandit bunny instead of the biting bunny. Ernie clearly prefers this relationship to the previous biting relationship. Ernie now enjoys and elicits the clicker games by waiting on a towel in the evening to signal that he wants to come downstairs to play.

The Bunny Moon

Rabbits are social animals and benefit from a close relationship with other bunnies, or even other animals such as cats, dogs or guinea pigs. Sometimes bunnies are hostile to each other and must be helped to bond. This bonding process has been affectionately dubbed the “bunny moon” and

replaces stressful approaches such as placing rabbits together in a hostile environment such as the bathtub or a box in a moving car where they may be induced by anxiety or outright fear to seek comfort from one another. Bonding using the clicker is much more humane and effective. Clicker conditioned rabbits are placed within detection range, but out of contact with each other and receive clicks and treats. They engage in very short, very rewarding sessions in increasingly close proximity to each other until they come to enjoy each other's presence and begin to interact in a positive way.

Clicker training is a fun, effective and force-free way to train your bunny (or any pet). Whether you want to compete in the sport of rabbit hopping, condition your show rabbit to enjoy handling by strangers, eliminate the fuss from nail clipping, bond your bunny to another bunny or simply to enhance your relationship and have more fun with your pet, clicker training provides a means to do this. Patience, observation skills and good treats are all you need to get started on the way to an enhanced relationship with your bunny.

Sidebar: Tips for Success

1. Be sure rabbit is healthy, is receiving adequate nutrition and has free access to hay and water at all times in its condo.
2. Use good treats – the reward must be more interesting to the rabbit than distractions in the environment.
3. Be patient – allow the rabbit ample time and opportunity to explore the training area (this may take more than one session).
4. Provide the rabbit with a comfort zone – a non-slip mat and litter box and perhaps even a covered box where it can hide if necessary.
5. Click and treat in the condo at first if the rabbit is nervous on the outside.
6. Work in a low distraction environment at first – use barriers and remove anything that you do not want the rabbit to investigate.
7. Keep sessions short – 5 minutes is plenty at first.
8. Rabbits are easily bored – repeat one thing only a few times per session.
9. Use several different types of treats in each session and reserve special treats only for training.
10. Use jackpots – larger or special treats to acknowledge especially good performance.

Sidebar: Karen Pryor's 10 Laws of Shaping

1. Raise criteria in increments small enough so that the subject always has a realistic chance of reinforcement.
2. Train one aspect of any particular behavior at a time. Don't try to shape for two criteria simultaneously.
3. During shaping, put the current level of response on a variable ratio schedule of reinforcement before adding or raising the criteria.
4. When introducing a new criterion, or aspect of the behavioral skill, temporarily relax the old ones.
5. Stay ahead of your subject: Plan your shaping program completely so that if the subject makes sudden progress, you are aware of what to reinforce next.
6. Don't change trainers in midstream. You can have several trainers per trainee, but stick to one shaper per behavior.
7. If one shaping procedure is not eliciting progress, find another. There are as many ways to get behavior as there are trainers to think them up.
8. Don't interrupt a training session gratuitously; that constitutes a punishment.
9. If behavior deteriorates, "Go back to kindergarten." Quickly review the whole shaping process with a series of easily earned reinforcers.
10. End each session on a high note, if possible, but in any case quit while you're ahead.

From Don't Shoot the Dog: The new art of teaching and training. by Karen Pryor