

Clicker Training Your Ferret

By Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin

Is your ferret inquisitive, full of fun, quirky, a born entertainer? Congratulations, you have a pet that is natural candidate for clicker training! When we introduced Gwen the ferret to clicker training she was so excited to realize that she could control the game and induce us to give her a click and a treat that she did a happy ferret dance all over the room. The next day Gwen taught all her fellow ferrets to touch a ball that she had learned to touch for a click and treat the day before. According to clicker pioneer Karen Pryor, “Clicking with small pets brightens their lives, exercises their lively minds, and brings out their endearing personalities. It's mentally and physically enriching for the animals”. If you would like to engage in more activities with your ferret, improve aspects its behavior, clip its nails without a fight or simply enhance your relationship 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 ferret that a desired action has been performed. The click is always followed closely with a tangible reward (such as a food treat) so that the ferret comes to associate the click with something desirable. Soon the click becomes a positive reinforcer for the ferret 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. We caught Gwen’s “Aha” moment on film and this has amused audiences at Clicker Expo conferences all over the United States. You can visit www.clickertraining.com to see this for yourself.

You may be wondering, “Why do I need the clicker? Why can’t I just give my ferret a treat without the click sound? Why can’t I just say ‘good boy’ to my ferret rather than clicking?” The magic of clicker training comes from the precision, clarity and consistency of the click. The click means “YES! That was right”. The absence of a click means try again. The ferret knows that the click means treat, every time. There is no uncertainty. In addition, the click is quick, while speaking is slower and requires more brain power for processing.

It is not usually possible to deliver a treat precisely at the same time a behavior occurs, especially if your ferret is in a cage or across the room from you. The click, therefore, lets you “mark” the behavior exactly when it occurs. If you simply give a treat, the ferret may have done several other behaviors by the time it actually receives the treat and it will not know exactly what the treat was for.

In clicker training there is no scolding, punishment, physical force, fear or intimidation used. Incorrect behavior is simply ignored, not even a simple “no” is ever used. Scientific studies conducted at the University of North Texas under the direction of Dr. Jesus Rosalez-Ruis have proven that animals learn faster and retain the learning better if there is no correction during teaching (even if this is just a mild reminder).

The clicker can be used to mark all sorts of different behaviors. In the case of a shy ferret the click can be simply to mark eye contact or a slight movement toward the handler. Randy Belair, founder and president of the Ferret Aid Society in Toronto Canada has used the clicker successfully to teach ferrets not to bite. This makes them much more adoptable!

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 ferret wants and that you can readily provide. Food is the easiest to deliver and most powerful reward for most ferrets.

At first the click must come almost simultaneously with the treat to build the association between click and treat. Click and give the ferret a treat. The treat can be placed on the ground if the ferret does not yet take food from your hand, is overly excited or nippy. As soon as the ferret picks up the food, click. After a few clicks and treats, wait for the ferret 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 ferret performs the movement that is being marked. You will soon find that your ferret begins to try to repeat behaviors that earned a click and a treat and the game is on!

Finding the Right Reinforcers

Possible reinforcers are food, praise, attention, petting, toys and games. To identify the best reinforcer for your ferret, just observe and see what makes it happy. A happy ferret responds with ears pricked forward and shows interest in what you are doing or offering. It may even leap around with its mouth open in kind of a crazed happy dance if it is really delighted. A ferret that lays its ears flat, squirms away, turns its back on you or ignores you altogether is not impressed with your offering. If your ferret arches its back, puffs up its fur and hisses, then you are angering or frightening it. If your ferret yawns, lick its chops, suddenly scratches itself or sneezes for no discernable reason when you handle or pet it, this is the ferret indicating annoyance. You may think that your pet enjoys certain types of handling, but it may be saying otherwise with its

body language. Dogs, cats, rabbits, rats and even horses exhibit some of these same body language signals, known as displaced behaviors, when they are feeling anxiety resulting from conflicting emotions. Observe your pet, if you see licking, yawning, scratching or sneezing that is out of context when you try to reward your ferret with petting, the ferret is telling you that the petting is not wanted at this moment. Many animals become very intense when involved in clicker training and while they may ordinarily enjoy petting, they do not want it when they are trying to learn. Food is the best reinforcer to use when teaching new lessons.

To identify favorite food treats is to offer a mixture in a bowl and see which are chosen first. Once you identify favorite foods, reserve these for training. To avoid feeding your ferret too many treats, measure out the treats for the day and when they are used up, the training is over. Some ferrets may work for part of their regular food ration. Do not withhold food from your ferret to make it hungry for training. This is not consistent with the positive nature of clicker training and animals that are frantic for food are not in a good state of mind for stress-free learning.

Don't be surprised if something the ferret likes one day is of no interest the next, or if your ferret suddenly wanders off in the middle of a training session. This happens in training with many animals, so just be patient and have fun with your pet.

Adding a Cue

A cue tells the ferret what you want it to do to receive the click and treat. A cue can be a word or a hand signal. Once a ferret reliably offers a behavior, a cue can be added. For example if you have placed a tunnel on the floor and the ferret goes through it (since ferrets cannot resist tunnels), click when the ferret is in the tunnel to indicate that this is desired behavior and deliver the treat when it emerges. The ferret will try again to see if another click and treat will happen. After two or three passes through the tunnel say "go through" as the ferret starts in. Then say "go through" before the ferret starts in. Soon the ferret will go through the tunnel in response to the verbal cue "go through". You don't want to create a ferret with an obsession for going through the tunnel in hope of a click and treat. To prevent this, reserve the click and treat for the times that the ferret goes through the tunnel only after you say "go through". The ferret will learn that it is futile to beg for treats by going through the tunnel, but worthwhile to go through the tunnel when it hears the cue. If your ferret has developed some annoying begging behaviors as a result of receiving food treats for spontaneous behaviors, you can get rid of these by putting them on cue

using the clicker and only rewarding cued behavior. Soon the begging will disappear if you steadfastly ignore it.

Shaping Behaviors

The process of incrementally developing a behavior one step at a time is called shaping. Shape behaviors by raising the criteria required for the ferret to receive a click. For example, in teaching a ferret to follow a target (a ball for example) place the ball on the ground and click/treat if the ferret looks at it. Then click/treat when the ferret takes a step toward the ball and then when it actually touches the ball. Next hold the ball in your hand and click/treat for looking at the ball, then touching it and so on until the ferret will move to touch the ball wherever you hold it. Now you can use the ball to move the ferret from place to place. You can attach the ball to the end of a stick and guide the ferret. Click/treat after one step of following the ball, then 2 steps and so on until the ferret will follow the ball wherever you move it. Targeting can be used to teach other behaviors including walking beside you, coming to you, going into the cage, going into the litter box, learning to trust and follow a new person. In shaping and indeed in all aspects of clicker training, mistakes are ignored. If the ferret 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 ferret becomes frustrated it may refuse to play anymore and may leave you to conduct some other more important ferret business.

Fading the Clicker and Treats

You do not need to click/treat forever. Once a behavior is learned and a cue is established, the click/treat can be faded by using it less frequently and then only occasionally. There is no rush to fade out the click/treat. 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 ferret 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 Ferrets Learn with Clicker Training?

Ferrets can learn to do anything that it is physically possible for them to do. You can teach your ferret to go over, around and through obstacles. Add voice cues to different behaviors such as

over, around and through so as to show off the true genius of your ferret and yourself as a trainer. Other natural behaviors that can be encouraged, enhanced and put on cue include standing on hind legs, moving or carrying of objects, rolling over and spinning in a circle.

Useful behaviors you can teach include coming when called, going to bed on cue, sitting on your shoulder and being gentle with their mouths when they play with you. Teach your ferret to come to you by click/treat whenever it happens to come near you. Use the target to induce the ferret to come to you. Once the ferret is coming to you deliberately, give the cue, “come” as it approaches. At first the word is meaningless, but after several repetitions of the cue in conjunction with the action of coming to you, the ferret will understand the meaning. After many repetitions, reduce the frequency of the click/treat when the ferret comes on cue. Instead reward with a game or a new toy or something else the ferret likes. Never call the ferret and then do something unpleasant.

Many people like to have their ferret ride on their shoulder. The old way to teach this was to place the ferret on the shoulder and then tip it off into a basket full of paper. The ferret would not be hurt, but frightened and would try to hang on the next time. A more humane way is to use positive reinforcement. While sitting on the couch entice the ferret onto your shoulder using the target, a food lure or a toy. Click and treat when the ferret is on or partly on your shoulder. Repeat a few times until the ferret is sitting all the way on your shoulder. Delay the click/treat for 1 second and then 2, up to 5 seconds. Begin to add slight body movements and gradually increase until eventually you can stand up and begin to move around with the ferret on your shoulder. Give a very high frequency of clicks and treats. Soon the ferret will enjoy riding on your shoulder just for the sake of it and you can fade the clicker and treats. Since you do not want your ferret to ambush you and hitch a ride whenever it gets the urge, put the shoulder riding on cue. Also teach the ferret to get off your shoulder on cue. Again you can use the target to help shape the getting off behavior. Once the ferret understands the concept of responding to cues, it can be taught opposite cues together. For example you can go back and forth between “on shoulder” click/treat and “off shoulder” click/treat. Any tricks that could become a nuisance if the ferret takes matters into its own paws should be taught with a “start” and “finish” cue so that the ferret knows when you are finished the game.

Is My Ferret a Genius?

Ferrets show an extraordinary aptitude for clicker training. Some ferrets get the idea with only a few clicks in the very first session and some take longer. The key to success with shy or fearful

ferrets is patience. Your ferret may be too excited to concentrate on training when you first come home or when you release it from the cage for play time. Let your ferret explore and play for 10 minutes before training. When you are first starting with clicker training take the ferret into the bathroom where there are fewer distractions. If you are the most interesting thing in the room you will have more success keeping your ferret's attention.

Once your ferret 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 ferret and you can move on to teaching advanced ferret skills and chaining behaviors together.

Sidebar: Tips for Success

1. Be sure ferret is healthy, is receiving adequate nutrition and has free access to fresh water at all times in its cage.
2. Use good treats – the reward must be more interesting to the ferret than distractions in the environment.
3. Be patient – allow the ferret ample time and opportunity to explore the training area (this may take more than one session).
4. Provide the ferret 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 cage at first if the ferret 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 ferret to investigate.
7. Keep sessions short – 5 minutes is plenty at first.
8. Ferrets 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.
11. Never say no, scold, use physical force do anything the ferret might find aversive during training.

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

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