

Homework, Week 1

Part I: Training a Conditioned Reinforcer

A Conditioned Reinforcer (CR) is the scientific term for an audible marker that tells your dog that what he was doing at the exact moment he heard the CR is what you want him to do. It also promises him that a reward is coming. Why train a CR for agility? Agility requires your dog to be working away from you which makes it difficult to deliver a treat at the exact moment your dog is doing the rewardable behavior. For example, if you are working on jumps and your dog responds to your signal to jump the jump, there is no way you can deliver a treat at the exact moment that your dog begins his take off for the jump. But, using a CR you can mark that exact moment and your dog will know that a reward is forthcoming as soon as he lands. Probably the best known CR is a clicker. A clicker is a perfect CR because the sound is always the same, its not a sound your dog hears casually day-to-day and delivery can be very fast. However, you can train other sounds or words to be a CR. It is best to choose a one syllable word or sound that you don't use often in casual conversation such as Chip. Using a word such as Good or Yes that your dog hears in general conversation can tend to water down the effectiveness of the cue. That is, he'll have a difficult time differentiating between Yes as a CR (meaning a treat is coming) and a general Yes.

Before you can begin using your CR, you have to first teach your dog what it means. Start with 15-20 really good treats in your hand. With your dog within arms reach, give your CR immediately followed by the treat. Do this in rapid succession until all the treats are gone. Be sure that you are not starting to deliver the treat before you have finished saying your CR. The sequence would go like this - "Chip", ½ second pause, deliver treat, Dog swallows treat, "Chip", ½ second pause, deliver treat, etc. This procedure only has to be done once or twice before your dog will understand that CR=Treat.

In order for your CR to be truly successful and useful, you must keep it pure. That is, CR **always** equals treat, even if you didn't mean to give the CR. This is an additional reason for choosing a unique word for your CR.

Part II: Hand Targeting

There are many handling aids that can be used when guiding your dog around an agility course. One such aid is hand targeting. When your dog learns to touch your open hand with his nose you can then use your hand to guide or position your dog. Teaching your dog to target your hand uses your dog's own natural curiosity. If you put your open hand in front of your dog's nose he will most likely sniff at it to see if there is anything in your hand for him. Your ultimate goal with this exercise is for your dog to come to your hand and bonk it with his nose when you put your open hand out and give your cue.

Start with a supply of good treats. Put your flat empty hand in front of your dog about 6-10 inches from his nose and hold it there. When your dog makes any move toward your hand, mark it with your CR, remove your hand from in front of your dog and treat. Put your hand out again and mark any movement toward your hand. The timing of your CR is very important. Be sure you are giving the CR at the same time as the behavior that you want to mark. When your dog has offered the same behavior more than three times in a row, raise the criteria (ie require the next step of the behavior) and wait for him to move closer to your hand. Keep raising the criteria until your dog is touching your hand with his nose. Then move your hand to a new location (left, right, higher, lower, to the side, in front of you, etc) and start over. Notice, you have not yet named this behavior. In fact, you're not saying anything at all (other than your CR). Be sure you're not moving your hand toward your dog's nose - let your dog move toward your hand.

When you can predict that your dog will touch your hand when it's presented, you can begin adding a cue, like "Touch." As your dog is touching your hand, say your cue followed by your CR and treat. Gradually begin saying your cue earlier and earlier until the cue is preceding the behavior. Once you have added a cue to the behavior, do not reward any non-cued Targeting. This is important as it gives you control of the behavior.