

Clicking with Cats in the Shelter Environment

By Karen Pryor on 10/01/2002

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Introduction

The shelter environment is hard on dogs and on people, but it's especially stressful to cats. They are subjected to a constant barrage of alarming stimuli, including noise, strange smells, intrusions from unknown humans, close confinement, and the often-frightening sight and smell of other unfamiliar cats-as well as loss of all familiar social contacts and all past comforts and amusements.

The result can be withdrawal and depression. The cat may still eat, and keep itself clean, and look normal to the casual observer, but it is in an internal prison as well as its physical prison. Just because the cat is not howling or trying to escape does not mean it is okay.

We cannot always do much about the physical environment, but we can change the mental environment in an instant. Clicker training is a good way to do it. With cats we need not use the clicker to 'train' the cat in the traditional sense; we can use it to enrich the cat's environment, to give it some control over its world, and if possible to widen its own perceptions of that world. We are communicating to the cat so the cat can learn healthy ways to communicate back.

To begin, here's a quick wake-up game for caged cats, which can be carried out by anyone, no skills are needed.

Touch the Target: an in-the-cage mental enrichment game

Equipment

- A highly-preferred food treat, such as canned tuna-or somewhat less messily, tuna in a pouch.
- Clicker
- A pencil, chopstick, or dowel to serve as a target.

Procedure

- Approach the liveliest cat in the cat room. Look at the cat, click, and push a pea-sized piece of tuna into the cage. (No bigger: the object is to please the cat, not to feed it a meal.)
- Wait for the cat to eat the tuna. If it doesn't eat, go to another cat immediately; you can come back to that one by and by. If the cat eats the tuna, click and treat two more times. Thenâ€

- Hold the end of your target up to the cage front, near the cat. The cat will sniff at it (if it doesn't, position the target closer to the cat's nose.) Click at the instant the nose touches the target. Treat. Wait for the cat to eat.
- Repeat a couple of times, and then move the target slightly, in various directions, clicking and treating for each touch.
- See if you can get the cat up on its hindquarters to reach the target, or click it for batting at the target. Jackpot (give extra treats.)
- Move on to another cat.
- Repeat later in the day or on another day, as time permits.
- Develop other opportunities to click. Use the target to lead the cat in or out of the cage, or out of the way during cleaning. Watch the cat: the target game tends to make cats feel playful, even old dignified cats. Click for any other cute things the cat may do.

Benefits

The targetting game can be played in very short sessions, with one cat or several, frequently or just occasionally, and by one person or several people. In the clicker game the animal learns for itself how to make good things happen. That gives cats something to look forward to. Research with zoo animals has shown that this kind of interaction with humans tends to increase overall activity levels, and to reduce the amount of time animals spend in the back of the cage. Causing clicks and getting paid with treats is actually more reinforcing than petting or play, and has distinct long-term benefits.

This is true for the people, too. The Target Game is rewarding for staff and volunteers. It gives them a sure-fire way to get positive responses from cats in their care, a highly rewarding experience for any animal lover. Anyone who wants to try can share in the experience, and everyone can appreciate the results, such as more confident, less fearful animals. Some shelters report that another side effect of clicker work, whether with cats or dogs, is a reduction in conflict and burnout in the staff and volunteers.

And of course, and perhaps most important from a humane standpoint, these simple, clicker-based interactions can make cats more adoptable.

Clicker games teach cats how to interact appropriately with humans. Confidence replaces fear. The cat discovers new skills and learns to adapt to new events. These are modest but fundamental changes that increase a cat's adoptability and the likelihood of an adoption becoming permanent.

Fearful and feral cats

Clicking is a quick way to build trust in a hissing, spitting cat; much quicker than trying to calm it or reassure it with social attention, and much kinder than just leaving it alone in the hopes the fear will eventually wear off. At the DeWitt Animal Hospital in Plainville, Massachusetts, Dr. Bruce Hill, DVM, and his staff have successfully treated, socialized, and placed many feral cats and kittens using clicker training.

Equipment

Leah Snowe, DeWitt Animal Hospital vet tech and official Pet Trainer, suggests starting frightened cats and kittens off with a temporary 'quiet' clicker, such as the dimpled cap from a Snapple soft drink or the easily buckled lid of a baby food jar, rather than a commercial box-clicker which can be startlingly loud.

Procedure

- Approach the cage, click, and as you click, toss in a treat as near to the cat as you can, and step backwards quietly. You are teaching the cat that the click not only means 'treat' but also means 'This scary person who is too near me goes farther away.' Repeat two or three times; even if the cat doesn't eat the treat, it is learning. If it eats, continue. If it doesn't eat, leave the treats in the cage and come back later and try again. Did the cat eat the food while you were gone? Good sign! Did the cat leave the food? Clean it up at the end of the day and try again another day.
- As the cat begins accepting the food, click, approach, and put the food near the front of the cage; then retreat.
- Let the cat finish the food while you stand there. Now don't click; just stand still and watch for any voluntary movement toward the front of the cage. Click during that movement, give treat, and step back. The cat becomes confident that it can make you click and treat by coming forward. It feels safe and in control of the situation-so, paradoxically, after a few more clicks and treats for the cat's forward movement, you can stop stepping backwards.
- Now introduce your target stick-use a long one, so you don't have to lean over the cat - and start developing touch-and-follow behaviors. You are on your way to a confident, touchable cat.

Socializing feral cats for adoptability

Clicker training can give a once-feral cat a behavioral repertoire that will enable it to live happily as a companion animal. At the DeWitt Animal Hospital Leah Snowe reports that they click for everything they give to feral animals, right from the start, including all food and water. Leah and others have taught a series of behaviors, including targeting and tricks, to neutered feral tom cats, resulting in friendly, purring, ingratiating pets that are confident of positive attention from humans.

Feral kittens, though they may be terrified at first, catch on to clicks and treats within hours. Here's a report on one litter of feral kittens, clicker trained at DeWitt:

Day One: Six kittens approximately four and a half weeks old. Initially hissing and spitting from the back corners; after brief repeated clicker sessions, voluntarily approaching the front of the cage for click and treat.

Day Two: Kittens tolerating finger scratching and petting through the cage front, for clicks and treats.

End of Week One: All kittens clicker-trained to permit being picked up, held, and stroked, and all have begun to purr.

End of Week Two: All kittens successfully adopted out.

We have just begun to find out what clicking will do for cats in the shelter environment. Don't be afraid to experiment; the cats think they are training you to click, and they will love you for that.
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FAQs

Do I need to condition the cat to the clicker before starting?

There is no need to 'charge up the clicker' or to go through any conditioning process before beginning to teach behavior. Cats easily condition to the clicker on a single click; in fact it is better to start right away, as soon as the cat is confidently eating, by looking for a behavior to click. That way the cat discovers from the first session that its own actions cause the click to occur. It is this discovery that makes the clicker process exciting and mentally stimulating for the cat.

What happens if more than one person is clicking in a room at the same time?

Several volunteers can work in the cat room at once; the cats will not be confused; they can easily tell which click comes from the person in front of them. Or one person can click several cats in sequence, rotating between them. The cats will be quite excited, waiting for their turn to come again. This draws in non-responsive cats as well.

Isn't it true that some cats aren't interested in food? The cat I was working with stopped eating and walked away after two treats.

If a cat refuses to eat, or backs away after a couple of responses, move on to another and come back later. Withdrawal does not mean the cat doesn't want the food, or doesn't like clicker training, or doesn't like you. It simply means the cat feels confused by this new event, and needs a little time to absorb what's happening.

A shy kitty that won't participate might get left out; isn't that unfair?

Many people naturally gravitate to the cats that don't participate. They sympathize, often even vocalizing that those other cats are getting something nice and this poor cat is being neglected. The tendency is to give special attention and free treats to the poor thing. This of course reinforces withdrawal. It is better to let that cat alone until it makes some movement forward, and then click and treat for even a faint sign of voluntary activity.

I know this cat isn't fat, he's just a big cat; and besides, he doesn't like treats. How can I click him?

Obese cats may not respond well to treats. It is not that they don't 'like' food, but just that they snack continually if food is continuously available, and thus have no room for even a taste of tuna. Remove all food for two hours before clicker class. You can go back to overfeeding him after the session, if you wish.

What if the cat ignores people altogether? Aren't some cats naturally aloof?

Some cats, even cats that have lived in households for years, are not properly socialized to humans. The giveaway is that they don't make eye contact. Click for eye contact with these cats. After the cat has learned to make eye contact, give it a temporary name, and whenever you happen to be passing, call the cat and click for turning toward you. This simple procedure, teaching eye contact and a name, can transform the cat's universe, or at least its view of the universe. (P.S. It also works for dogs.)

Doesn't the training have to be consistent? What if more than one person trains the cat?

The more different people click and treat each cat, the more powerful the learning will be. Even if the people aren't clicking for the same behaviors, if they all know enough to click first and then treat, the cat will learn that many people have merit to them and are worth interacting with. This is clicking as communication, for information rather than training. Having this information can make the cat far more adoptable.

We don't have to teach adopters how to use the clicker, do we? We don't have the time or the staff and they don't want to train their cats anyway, they just want a nice pet.

Adopters don't need to learn to 'train'; they just need to know how to say "Click!" to a cat. A cat that already understands the click will understand a click in a new environment. The cat will respond, immediately and positively, to the person doing the clicking. It's a shame to waste that bonding opportunity!

Show potential adopters how to hold and click the clicker, and how to feed a treat. Send them home with a clicker and some instructions (a Clicker Fun Kit for Cats makes a great going-home present.) If all they do is click and treat just a few times in the new home, you'll still be giving that cat a great head start.