Clicker Training 101
By Sarah Yasutake

Clicker training is a scientifically proven behavior modification method for all kinds of animals, including rabbits. In clicker training, the click is the “mark,” or signal, that tells the rabbit when he performs the precise behavior you want him to do. The trainer can use a hand-held clicker device (even a ball-point pen) or a tongue “click.” Paired with a tasty treat or other reward, the click provides immediate positive reinforcement.

Clicker training has several benefits when compared to other training methods. First, if the trainer is doing a good job, the click happens at the precise moment when the rabbit performs the desired behavior. When treats are used without a clicker, there is often a delay between the desired behavior and the mark. For example, if you’re teaching your rabbit to jump over a gate, with clicker training you will click when she leaps into the air, signaling that she’s done what you want her to do, and that she’ll be rewarded. If you were to simply use a treat, by the time you were able to get the treat to her the leap over the gate would be ancient history to the bunny. She’d be thinking to herself, “Hey, great, I get a treat for just sitting here!”

Second, with clicker training more than one person can participate in training the same rabbit without concern that the rabbit will grow accustomed to one person’s voice. Also, unlike the human voice, the clicker is neutral, and it won’t get louder or sound frustrated if the rabbit makes a mistake.

Before you start
Before you even begin to train your rabbit, you might want to spend some time experimenting with different types of clickers and deciding which type you’d like to use. Rabbits are easily startled, so the loud click on a dog-training clicker might be

Photograph by Kem Sypher

Gretchen Pauli (foreground) and Ingrid Bartlett (background) help rabbits learn the agility course at a recent Rabbit Advocate meeting.

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This issue of The Rabbit Advocate focuses on training. Each article featured discusses benefits and techniques for training rabbits, but each acknowledges that the rabbit caretaker must go through an equal amount of training as well. If you’d like to train your rabbit to come to you when called, or to be less fearful of nail trims or to run an agility course, understand that you will be going through just as much training as your rabbit.
Get training!  continued from front page

too loud for your bunny. You can try a ball-point pen, click your tongue, or purchase a special quiet clicker called the i-click. Then practice clicking with precision, but whatever you do, don’t practice where your bunny can hear you!

Next, create a distraction-free environment in which to train, being sure that the training environment isn’t stressful for your rabbit. Because rabbits are prey animals, they need to be comfortable in their environment to be ready to learn. A non-slip mat, litter box, and covered box for hiding all help create a comfortable space for most rabbits.

You’ll also need to decide what to use for “treats.” This depends on the rabbit—bunnies have different preferences. For some food might be the most motivating, for others it might be a favorite game or toy, and for others it might be grooming or petting. Observing your bunny to figure out what he prefers is a good way for you to get closer to your rabbit. Keep in mind that when it comes to food, rabbits have sensitive digestive systems, so it’s not a good idea to either withhold food before a training session or give large amounts of new foods during training. Also, food treats should be healthy, not junk food.

How long will it take to train your rabbit? Every rabbit is different. Some catch onto clicker training right away, but for others it will take several training sessions before they figure it out. Shy rabbits may take longer to train. For an especially shy rabbit, you might introduce the click sound by clicking every time you put hay or food in the rabbit’s habitat for a few days.

Getting started
To get started, choose 15 small bunny treats, such as pellets or bite-sized pieces of vegetables. Treats should be small, so that training will move along quickly. Feed the treats one at a time, and click when your bunny starts chewing. Your bunny will connect the sound of the click to eating food. Watch closely—after just a few clicks, she might already realize that the “click” means she’s about to get a treat.

Once your rabbit is accustomed to the clicker, you can start training. It’s easiest to start with behaviors that come naturally to rabbits: hopping, standing on hind legs, flinging toys, grooming, and flopping. Choose one behavior to work on per session, and click at the precise moment your rabbit does that behavior. Soon, your rabbit will repeat that behavior to earn a click and treat. Then, when you and your rabbit get good at clicker training, you can add more difficult tricks.

As your rabbit gets better at touching the target, gradually move it farther away. This is called “lengthening.” Your rabbit should be able to touch the target 85 percent of the time, and if he can’t, it means you have moved it too far away. Move it back a little and keep trying.

Lengthening is closely related to “shaping,” which is slowly teaching a behavior one small step at a time. For example, when training a rabbit to jump over a stick, you can start with the stick on the ground, and gradually raise the height after the rabbit receives several clicks for completing the jump.

Never punish your rabbit for making a mistake. If your rabbit makes a lot of mistakes, you are pushing her too much and need to back off to keep her from getting frustrated. Remember, clicker training should always be fun!

Adding a cue
A cue is a word, hand gesture, or anything else that the rabbit can discern that tells her what to do to receive a click and treat. For example, if you’re teaching your rabbit to stand on her hind feet for a treat, once she’s doing it reliably with the click and treat, you can add the word “up” as she stands up. Then start saying “up” before she stands up. This will teach her to stand up when you say the word “up.”

If you want to use a cue, wait until after the rabbit is already reliably performing a behavior before adding it in. Adding a cue too soon could confuse your rabbit.

Phasing out the clicker
Every time you click, you must follow up with a treat. This is an essential component of building trust between rabbit and trainer. In time, however, you can fade out the click by using it less often. There’s no need to rush to stop clicking and treating—the longer you reinforce a behavior with clicks and treats, the more deeply ingrained the behavior will be.

Clicker training for health and safety
Teach your rabbit tricks for fun, but also teach practical skills, such as sitting still for nail
trimming or coming when called. You can use clicker training to reinforce litter box habits or to redirect problem behaviors.

Clicker training can also reduce the stress of bunny bonding. Instead of putting the bunnies together in a slippery bathtub or a moving car, use clicker training to teach them to associate something positive with each other’s presence. Start with the two rabbits out of contact range but close enough that they can detect one another. Give each rabbit clicks and treats in short sessions, gradually increasing the rabbits’ proximity to each other. Eventually the rabbits will become accustomed to each others’ presence and start engaging in positive interactions with each other.

Rescue groups are using clicker training to teach behaviors that will make rabbits more adoptable, such as teaching shy bunnies to come to the front of their condos and teaching rabbits to do tricks. What a great way to use rabbits’ natural intelligence to their advantage!

Clicker training can open up a whole new world of possibilities for you and your rabbit. Have patience, but especially, have fun finding out just how much your rabbit can do.

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**Glossary of clicker training words**

- **Clicker:** A device that makes a clicking sound, such as a commercial training clicker, a ball-point pen with a push top, or a person’s tongue.
- **Mark:** the signal that tells the rabbit which behavior earns the treat
- **Cue:** a word or gesture that tells the rabbit what to do to earn a click and treat
- **Targeting:** the process of teaching a rabbit to touch and then follow a target
- **Shaping:** the incremental process of teaching a more complicated behavior

**Clicker training resources**

- **Book:** Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin: Getting Started: Clicking with Your Rabbit (2006) (available at clickertraining.com)
- **Video:** Bunny Training by Barbara Heidenreich (available at bunnytraining.com)
- **iClick training clicker** (available at store.binkybunny.com)
- **Targets and clickers** (available at clickertraining.com)

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**Use training techniques as a wellness check**

Dr. Katrina Ramsell, Exotic Pet Vet, suggests offering your rabbit a small treat in the morning and a small treat in the evening. Not only is this a training technique to encourage your rabbit to come running to you at about the same time each day, but it also is an early warning sign for health problems. If your rabbit consistently comes for his twice-daily treat, then if he should refuse it or fail to come running to you, it is possible a health related problem may be growing. This can be an early warning sign that you need to take action to help your rabbit feel better. Inconsistent behavior is an indicator that something is amiss. A rabbit that refuses his treat is trying to tell you that he doesn’t feel well and that you need to take some action.

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**Try clicker training to challenge and build your rabbit’s confidence**

*By Kat Slinde and Cherrie Champie*

When you walk into the front room of the home we share with our four rabbits, you will see boxes, tunnels, and tubes through which our bunnies run. There are expandable curved tubes to dart through; cones to run around; ramps for climbing up and down; and wicker hoops, blocks, balls and toys to toss. All these games and toys are for our rescued rabbits, and just like other rabbits they are intelligent, curious and playful. They can learn at any age and will never forget what they have been taught.

Our rescued bunnies have emotional or behavioral challenges and we start almost right away to build trust and confidence by spending time on the floor with them playing with toys and enthusiastically celebrating their accomplishments. We are quick to learn which toys are their favorites. Some favor wooden blocks, jingle balls, or plastic keys to toss, stackable cups to knock over and wicker baskets to dig in.

Sitting on the floor is a perfect time to start training your bunny. Make sure you have some special small treats at the ready. When you have your bun’s attention, hold a treat well above them and give the command: “sit pretty.” This is a natural behavior for your bun and should be easily accomplished. To have your bunny do a left or right spin, hold a treat in your hand and circle it around your bunny with the command: “spin.” You can have your bun go “under” your leg, “around” you, and even jump “up” on a pad on your lap. Do not do too much too soon, be consistent in your commands and be sure that you and your bun are having fun. These are short one-on-one activities...
Ingrid and Gretchen belong to a 4-H group based in Clackamas County, Oregon, and they both have tremendous experience training their rabbits to complete agility courses. Ingrid’s agility course is completely portable and makes liberal use of indoor/outdoor carpeting cut into strips to allow a square course to be set up anywhere she is called to demonstrate agility training. Both girls started with a 4-H club that was focused on agility training. Their current club remains focused on showmanship of their rabbits but provides an opportunity for agility training as well.

It is clear the girls enjoy encouraging their rabbits to run the course, which features jumps, ramps and even a teeter-totter. The rabbits clearly enjoy themselves too. Ingrid’s Momo, a little black mini rex, is a champion and once set on the ground, quickly makes his way around the course. It is his course, after all, and he makes each jump and turn like the athlete he is.

The audience simply can’t help itself. Laughter and words of encouragement are punctuated with applause when the rabbit jumps high or runs at full-speed through a tunnel. It’s difficult to suppress the delight humans experience when watching rabbits run through an agility course. And young Rabbit Advocate volunteers Ingrid Bartlett and Gretchen Pauli work hard to make sure that both the rabbits and the humans experience equal amounts of fun.

Ingrid and Gretchen have helped uninitiated rabbit caretakers and their rabbits run the course for the first time. Ingrid is philosophical about the activity and believes that pet rabbits should be allowed regular exercise and play. The agility course allows rabbits plenty of exercise, and gives caretakers the excuse to have fun with their rabbits. She observes that rabbits that are infrequently allowed space to roam and play will be anxious to get on the course and stretch their legs. Rabbits that are never treated to social interaction, who are not physically or mentally engaged, avoid the course. But she is quick to note that both kinds of rabbits—and their caretakers—will benefit from the engaged activity the course offers.

The girls admit that the training they do is not for the rabbits. In truth, they are training the caretaker how to encourage the rabbits to go through the course. Ingrid cautions that she has seen people put harnesses and leashes on their rabbits and then pull the bunny through the course. She’s also seen people nudge the bunny with their foot. Both should be avoided and people should only use their hands...
to encourage their bunnies to go over jumps or through tunnels. Gretchen says even hands are not really needed. Her best method of encouragement is to simply take a step back from the rabbit and move behind it. The rabbit seems to take this as a hint to move forward. No hands are needed at all, she says.

Rabbits are sprinters, not marathon runners, and the same is true of their training. The girls agree that the best training is short bursts of activity punctuated by long periods of rest. If the rabbit lays down, then the rabbit is tired and should be allowed to rest away from the course, Ingrid said.

One important part of the training is that there is a definite direction to the course. The rabbits should run the course in one direction, rather than going back and forth on the course. In this way, multiple rabbits can run the course at the same time without running into each other.

Teaching the rabbit takes time, Gretchen says, and she cautions that rabbit caretakers should not expect their rabbits to understand the point of the course right away. The experience should be enjoyable for the rabbit and the caretaker should offer encouragement all along the way. But Ingrid relates that sometimes encouragement has too much of an effect on the rabbits. When her bunny Momo first encountered the small dowel that serves as the barrier to jump over, he took it from the bracket with his mouth and moved it out of the way. That’s common for rabbits to do the first time they see the dowel, they treat it like a stick or a piece of hay and toss it. The audience at the time began laughing at him. Egged on by the positive reinforcement, Momo figured out that every time he grabbed the dowel, the humans thought it was funny and rewarded him with laughter. Soon, he grabbed the dowel and ran away with it. Ingrid agreed that it was funny, but comic antics are not the point. He had to be retrained to use the course properly.

The girls made their agility courses using materials from a home improvement supply store, but said there may be a ready-made agility jump available at Petco. The non-skid surface of Ingrid’s portable course is indoor/outdoor carpeting. The tube is a cement form, shortened so that the rabbit can see through the tube to the daylight on the other side and boards set on each side of the tube to keep it from rolling. The ramp is two boards, covered with the carpeting and then hinged so that the rabbit runs up one side and then down the other.

The girls will take part in the 4-H competitions at the Clackamas County Fair. Agility demonstrations are featured Tuesday, August 12 through Saturday, August 16, beginning at 6:30 p.m. (weather permitting) in front of the rabbit barn in the small animal ring.

Go, Momo, go! The sprinter needs no encouragement to leap over the obstacle. Lollipop is right behind him.
that helps your normally food foraging bunny learn to follow food treats.

Next, we venture into clicker training. A small clicker device can be purchased at many places selling pet supplies. We use a clicker, a “target” and treats. Our target is an 18-inch wooden dowel with a ping pong ball attached to the end. Basically a “click” lets the bun know they’ve done something right.

Try this: Sit on the floor and carefully watch your bunny. When your bun is close to you and starts to come toward you, gently tap the target twice on the floor and give the command, “touch.” Your bun will be curious about the target and naturally bump it with his or her nose. This is when you click the clicker and offer the bunny the rewarding treat. Your bun will quickly learn to follow the target, and eventually follow the target through soccer cones, up ramps, onto your lap and around any course you choose. With enough repetitions your bun will learn what to do by your voice commands and hand signals. These activities may be so much fun that ear rubs and an occasional treat will be sufficient reward. Always focus on fun and positive reinforcement and you will be building a close bond of love and respect. You will be amazed at how smart and clever your bunny really is!

**(Mis)Adventures in Clicker Training**

A few months after my husband and I adopted our bunny, Nutmeg, we started to increase the number of areas in our house she had access to, including our upstairs bedroom. We then discovered that her favorite place to be was under our bed and it was nearly impossible to get her out from under it. This posed a problem because we needed to be able to get her back in her space to give our other bunny, Cuddles, to whom she is not bonded, a chance to free roam in the house as well. We tried luring Nutmeg out from under the bed with treats, but she decided she was willing to forgo the treats in order to stay snug in her spot. We often ended up having to use the plastic lids to our under-the-bed sweater boxes to herd her out from under the bed, which ended up taking up to 15 or 20 minutes, which often led to copious thumping on our part and complete exhaustion on ours.

We hated to have to restrict her access to our bedroom, but we just couldn’t keep going through this ordeal of getting Nutmeg out from under the bed every night. After doing some research online, I hit on the solution: clicker training. Bunnies are highly intelligent and most are food-motivated, making them excellent candidates for clicker training. If we could just clicker train Nutmeg, we could get her to come out from under the bed with a simple click of the clicker followed by a treat and our problem would be solved. I read several articles about clicker training rabbits and watched several YouTube videos that made clicker training a rabbit look easy-peasy, so I felt ready to embark on this project with Nutmeg.

Step one of clicker training is to get your pet to associate the click of the clicker with a tasty treat coming her way. The instructions in the wonderful article written by Teresa Lewin, Andrea Bratt Frick and Jean Silva of the House Rabbit Society read as follows:

> “Start before a meal with 15 bunny-bite sized treats. Rabbit pellets can work, as can bite-sized pieces of vegetables. Feed one treat and as they chew, click once. When they stop chewing, feed another bite and click. Feed and click until the treats are gone. Stop.”

So, one evening after work, I armed myself with a ballpoint pen to use as a clicker and 15 small sprigs of cilantro, one of Nutmeg’s favorite treats. I sat down in her space, gave her some pets and then offered her the first sprig of cilantro. Per the instructions, while she was chewing, I clicked the ball point pen. She looked at me a bit quizzically, but continued chewing. I waited for her to finish and then offered her the second sprig and clicked the pen again. We went on like this until she had had nine sprigs of the cilantro and then she refused to take any more. The House Rabbit Society article emphasizes that the training should be fun for your bunny, not work, and you should stop before she gets bored. So, I gave it a rest even though we hadn’t gotten through the full 15 treats.

I came back to Nutmeg a few hours later, just before it was time for her evening salad, this time armed with 15 pellets, which she also loves. She gets a tablespoon of pellets for breakfast in the morning and usually hoovers them in five seconds flat and then looks at us all Oliver Twist-like as if to say, “Please, can I have some more?” So, I figured the pellets would be a well-received clicker training treat. I sat down, offered her one of the pellets, and clicked the pen. She chewed the pellet, and I immediately offered the next one. She yanked it from me with what sure seemed like exasperation. I clicked the pen and she gave me a look that I can only equate to a surly teenager rolling her eyes. I offered the next treat and she refused to take it. I thought, “okay, she’s had enough training for today and is probably anxious to get her salad. We’ll try again tomorrow.” When my husband brought Nutmeg her salad a few minutes later, she ate it with alacrity, so it wasn’t an appetite issue, she was clearly just done with training for the time being.

The next evening after work, I came into Nutmeg’s space with 15 small sprigs of parsley. She took the first one quickly, and I clicked the pen. And then she thumped. The House Rabbit Society article didn’t mention what you are supposed to do if...
your bunny thumps back at you. I had the thought that maybe this was a fun game for her. I’m making a noise at her, so she’s making a noise back at me. I tried offering her another sprig of parsley. She took it, but turned her back to me and when I clicked the pen, she thumped again. “Nutmeg” I cooed, “Let’s turn around and have another piece of parsley.” I eventually got her back to facing me and gave her another piece of parsley, which she took warily, her eyes fixed on my hand holding the ball point pen as she started chewing, I clicked the pen with my left hand, and went to offer her the next piece of parsley with my right. Instead of taking the parsley from my right hand, she grabbed the pen out of my left hand and tossed it. She then thumped the loudest thump yet, throwing all eight pounds of her bunny fury into those back feet of hers. Then she thumped again for good measure and hopped off into her cardboard Rabbit Villa.

The House Rabbit Society article had indicated the following about clicker training:

“Bunny links the sound of the click to food. As you train, the response becomes stronger. The click says food is coming. The two of you can use this one piece of information to start some very interesting conversations.”

Interesting conversations, indeed! Clearly, Nutmeg had spoken and in doing so decreed that Nutmeg will not be participating in any more clicker training.

For more information, go to www.rabbit.org
Upcoming Meetings & Events 2014

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