

Clicker Training the Retrieve

Assume the dog is clicker aware, knows that click marks the good and will be rewarded every time. I use soft cat treats, and only use these for clicker training new stuff. They are small and very flavorful.

Go into a small room with no distractions. Or a larger room but keep the dog on a six foot leash that you step on. It's just to limit excessive avoidance but not to make the dog do anything.

Do not talk. Sit in a chair with treats on a table next to you but not accessible to the dog, or not easily accessible to the dog.

Hold the dumbbell in front of you. Look at the dumbbell and not at the dog. Using your peripheral vision, if the dog looks at the dumbbell, click and treat. If you have to, put the clicker on the ground and work it by stepping on it. Click and treat every time the dog looks in the direction of the dumbbell. When the dog clearly understands that looking at the dumbbell will earn a click and treat, raise the criteria --- wait until the dog touches the dumbbell with his nose.

NO TALKING!!! Not a word. The dog will begin to get interested in what will earn clicks. If he is a little confused, he may offer another behavior. Ignore that one and wait. As soon as he touches the dumbbell, click and treat.

Keep these sessions short, less than five minutes a day. End on a good note- I usually end after a click and treat, and then I party with my dog, telling her that was fun and if they're good dogs maybe we'll do it again tomorrow, and I put the dumbbell away – I use the top of the refrigerator because that's where we do this work... in my kitchen. Now praise as much as you want! And get out of the area. Go do something else fun.

Once the dog understands that touching the middle of the dumbbell --- he only gets clicked if he is on the bar of the dumbbell and not the bell at the end --- you can move the dumbbell to the side (holding your arm to the right or left). Now he has to go to another spot to touch it. Then the other side. You are building drive to get to the bar on the dumbbell. He always has to go TO the dumbbell.

The next step after touching the dumbbell is to wait until the dog opens his mouth near the center – the bar. It's especially nice if they open their mouth and move towards the dumbbell so the bar is inside their mouth. If that happens, this is the next level and don't click anything less. Now you are waiting for the dog to open his mouth and put the open mouth around the bar of the dumbbell.

Never offer the dumbbell to the dog- he always has to come to the dumbbell.

Remember again. Do not talk. Communication at most is looking at the dumbbell and not the dog. This tells the dog where the focus is – if you look at the dog, he will look back at you and this is not what we want here.

By this time, you both will be understanding this game. We then begin to stop holding the dumbbell with our hand... this is a big step for some dogs, so I put the dumbbell between my knees and proceed from clicking the opening of the mouth to waiting until the dog puts his open mouth on the dumbbell. Click and treat each time this happens. If you can shape the dog's behavior to closing his mouth on the dumbbell and even lifting it a little from between your knees, click and treat--- he's going to drop the dumbbell for this but that's okay.

He is beginning to understand that the important part of this oddly shaped thing is the middle, the bar. There is no reward for going near the end, or the bell of the dumbbell. Only the bar.

The hardest part for this training for me is teaching the dog that he can actually walk with the dumbbell. Here is where I absolutely positively use "back chaining". Teach the dog what the final result will be and reward like crazy for it. In competition, the final result is the dog sitting in front of you with the dumbbell in his mouth. So we go from us sitting in a chair and having him take the dumbbell from between our knees to standing up and (now here I use less shaping) telling him to sit. To keep the dumbbell in the dogs mouth while they sit, I gently put the leash under the jaw to support it and the dumbbell.

So this is the big part of the clicker retrieve and the back chaining. Brainwashing the dog to believing that the best thing in the world is to sit in front of you with a dumbbell in his mouth. No matter where the dog may find a dumbbell, he should want to come to sit in front of you with it. I do help with this a little bit. On leash. Many smiles. Some verbal encouragement because changing position while holding is a brand new thing.

The next step is to have the dog take a few steps with the dumbbell in his mouth and sit in front. Before you do that, you may have to go back to picking up the dumbbell – now not from between your knees but rather from a chair – something at the same height as your knees – you gradually make that lower until it is on the floor. Picking up from the floor is sometimes more challenging but wait it out.

You are still clicking and treating, maybe guiding a little once the dog has the dumbbell in his mouth and has to move--- either to take a few steps or to sit in front, but he must go to the dumbbell himself. If he doesn't, you've rushed a step. He should believe that when he sees a dumbbell, he must go to it and possess it. Just because. This is what the clicker training taught him. That the dumbbell is significant. NOT that he is chasing it. There is no throwing of the dumbbell until the dog believes that the dumbbell itself is incredibly rewarding.

I personally do not throw the dumbbell for a lot of training sessions. For me, it may be a month or longer after I get the dog to pick up the dumbbell and come back to sit in front.

I will do placed retrieves. Nearby, gradually further away. In the dead of winter, I've placed a dumbbell in the hallway up seven steps and sent my dog to pick it up. Because she was clicked into believing that she is happiest with the dumbbell in her mouth – and once in her mouth, she is even happier bringing it to sit in front of me, she will go get that dumbbell and bring it. BIG PARTY!!!! I've placed a dumbbell at

the training club in various places that the dog can see and can readily get to but is not necessarily a straight line – under the A frame, whatever.

This is not a game of fetch. The dumbbell does not have to move for the dog to want to go get it.

This actually also helps with the utility article exercise, because those articles are just quietly sitting there smelling like people. So it's easy for the dog to understand the picking up--- and the returning to front ---

So, for the placed retrieve, I will put the dog in a sit stay, go out and place the dumbbell not far in front, go back to the dog, who is on a long line until they understand this game – no self rewarding with zoomies- the reward comes when they are sitting in front with the dumbbell – so I put the dumbbell maybe ten feet in front. Go back to the dog. If he's looking at the dumbbell, tell him to bring or whatever command you will be using for the retrieve. This command will only be used for the formal retrieve so remember it and use it every time. If he goes to the dumbbell, picks it up and returns and sits in front, click and treat if you want but remember he will drop the dumbbell at the click, so at this point you can take the dumbbell and click and treat ---- or just now start praising verbally --- big party.

Hope this helps, it's worked for the past five dogs I've trained this way, and it really has taken two weeks or less. And I'm not that kind of a trainer!

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