Guiding Eyes Graduate Call

Date: Saturday, May 23, 2020

Topic: Using the Clicker as a Training Tool.

Presenter: Caryn Fellows, Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) - Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Moderator: Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President

Caryn Fellows graciously took time out today to talk about using the clicker as a training tool in working with our dogs. It’s important to start slowly and build up to the desired task you want your dog to do. Caryn stressed that unless you are teaching a new command or task, not to preload your hand with a food reward. The exception to this is when you need to lure the dog to start teaching them the desired behavior. Successful use of the Clicker is as follows: First, show the dog the behavior that is wanted; then, use the "touch" command (if targeting something), then click and treat, having the clicker in the opposite hand. It is important to click as soon as you feel the dog's nose hit your hand. It may take a lot of repetition in order for the dog to accomplish the desired behavior. Types of food reward used can be in the form of either kibble from the dog's daily food allowance, Charlee Bears or some other low calorie treat. Caryn also went on to say that since a lot of people are home so much now, targeting anything in the home (doorknobs, dog toys, etc.), can make being at home more fun for the handler and the dog.

Graduate Questions:

Kitty: What if you reward the dog for the action you do not want it to do?

Caryn said to stop rewarding for the unwanted action and reteach and reward for the desired action.

Dorothy: If you gave your dog a reward for doing something close to what you wanted, how is that different from rewarding an action you did not want, then teaching the action that you actually do want?

Caryn answered that this could be situational. If teaching something specific , rewarding behavior that is similar to the desired action is needed. In addition, the technique of luring the dog to the desired behavior can be used until the desired behavior is achieved. It is important to correctly judge when the dog is doing the desired behavior for the purpose of clicking and treating. This can take practice. Additionally, it may happen that the dog may try to add in other behaviors in addition to what is being asked (if the desired behavior is to have the dog put its nose on a toy, the dog may also try to put its nose as well as its paws on the toy). It is up to the graduate to decide if this is something that can be tolerated, depending on the desired behavior in question.

Andrea: If the dog understands the "show me" or "find it" command and the handler isn't understanding when the paws go down in addition to the nose, do the dogs put the paws down instead of the nose because it could be noticed easier?

Caryn answered that could be the case. The challenge for the dog is trying to figure out what behavior is being asked for.

Wendy asked about her dog who is very cautious on street crossings and not food oriented. Could clicking once the up curb is reached help for reinforcing the correct behavior?

Caryn answered that it could be a stress component to being cautious in the street and a better idea would be to reward after getting past the up curb. Having the dog sit and ask for a "touch" may be a successful way to reward the dog in this instance.

Sheila asked about pedestrian push buttons. She stated that her dog targets these, but she now lives in a smaller town where there are fewer of them and some of the push buttons are on wooden poles instead of metal. She further stated that she was worried about getting splinters from the wooden poles and questioned if she should reward her dog bringing her to them.

Caryn answered yes. If it doesn’t look the same, the dog might still show the poll. No training need occur, because the dog has already generalized the behavior.

Sheila also asked about the button on the pole on the reverse trip being on the back side and how this should be approached.

Caryn suggested to use the technique of backchaining to the button using sighted help and training with the clicker.

Katie asked about country working in her neighborhood and sidewalks in her town in Alaska without streetlights and asked about following people in stores. She stated that she is having a problem with her dog following people to the extent he is following people across the street. She wondered if working with the clicker could reinforce him checking in with her.

Caryn answered that it’s not uncommon for the dog to follow people traveling with the handler. It could be helpful to have the other person walk behind the handler. The clicker could be helpful if the dog is looking for the person to reinforce the dog working correctly. Using the technique of clicking while moving, when the dog is exhibiting the wanted behavior, could also be helpful.

Katie also asked about walking with stray dogs around related to the idea of the dog thinking it’s play time.

Caryn answered that it’s a problem where the handler wants the dog to work and not socialize. The clicker could be used to refocus the dog in this situation. You could use the clicker to set the situation up and then click and treat for the dog starting to check in and do the expected action.

Katie also asked how she could get a clicker.

Caryn said she could see about sending her one but clickers can also be gotten on Amazon. She explained that there are different types of clickers-one that is shaped more like a box and a second button-shaped type.

Kitty also wanted clarification regarding Caryn’s earlier answer about people wanting the dog to follow. If the person won’t walk behind, at what point should you click and treat? If the person moves behind, does the handler click and treat?

Caryn responded to click and treat when the dog does something rewardable (moving in front of the other person). A suggestion would be to have the person stand in front and let the dog work around them to the desired location and then click and treat.

Deborah commented that it is important when working with people to make sure the dog is doing what it is trained to do.

Caryn said it is all about being consistent.

Liz comment that sometimes if she is teaching her dog something, with another person and unsure what her dog is doing, she will let the sighted person handle the clicker/click aspect when they see the dog giving the desired action, at which point the treat is given. (Sometimes it is necessary to instruct the sighted person in the use of the clicker before they can help with this). She also suggested that if sighted assistance is not available, particularly related to teaching things inside, using the Aira service to gauge what the dog is doing can be helpful.

Sheila asked about refocusing when dogs are running loose and what to do if the dogs running loose are coming after her dog.

Caryn suggested the guide dog is being defensive for the other dog(s) being in its space. Caryn suggested to stop and calmly keep the guide dog in a controlled position or if the dog turns around, let her defend her space. If the owner is around, ask the owner of the dog to move the dog out of the situation. Sometimes the best idea is to avoid the area altogether. Use praise in this situation, not the clicker.

Katie: If when dogs are running loose and [my] dog is engaging with them, would it help to have someone to work through the situation ?

Caryn suggested it would be good because of the situation and then you could click after the dog worked past the other dog. It all comes down to timing and you need something specific to click for. Assistance can be helpful in the timing of the click and the reward.

Dorothy asked about someone jumping out of the way and you’re using a person as an obstacle and the dog runs you into the person.

Caryn said to correct it like any other clearance obstacle. If the dog takes off in the same direction after giving the "forward" command, do not go with them. After a couple of times of this happening, give the dog a cue or ask again and the dog will figure out which way to go. Reward if the dog navigates in the desired direction.

Respectfully submitted

Lin and Thermo

Grad council member