

## Building Your Clicker Training Skills

Developing your clicker training skills allows you to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of your training sessions. It will also improve the clarity with which you communicate with the cats during training. Your cats will thank you for taking the time and effort to build top-notch clicker skills! A good trainer is proficient at these parts of the training process:



### Observation Skills:

- Setting criteria for what is a reinforceable, or “clickable,” behavior
- Observing cats and identifying when they meet criteria for the behavior you are reinforcing

### The Link:

- Timing your click

### Mechanical Skills:

- Delivering a reinforcer

After each section below, you’ll find a description of a game that can help you build the skills above. **You will need the following equipment for each person:** a clicker, two cups or bowls, a bag of small candies (e.g. M&Ms, Skittles, Reese’s Pieces) or beans (e.g. Great Northern Beans, uncooked), and dice or a deck of cards, face cards removed.

## Observation Skills: Setting Criteria

Decide ahead of time on one behavior you will focus on for each session. Once you make that decision, you need to decide what specific action you need to observe the cat complete for you to click then reinforce. For example, if you are working on “sit,” the action you need to see in order to click then reinforce is (a) the cat’s hips and base of tail touching the ground while (b) the front legs are extended and front feet touching the ground. You need to see both (a) and (b) completed at the same time (i.e. “meet criteria”) for the cat to be in a sit position. Every behavior you choose to train should be broken down into the “clickable moment” before you start training, so you know what you are looking for during your observation.

**Game Time:** In pairs, decide which person will be “evens” and which person will be “odds.” Then...

## Observation Skills: Observing Behavior

Once you have decided what to look for, you will need to train yourself to observe closely for the exact moment when the cat meets criteria. Be careful that you are not anticipating the cat’s behavior, you actually need to observe them meet criteria. Humans are often impatient and do not wait for the cat to fully meet criteria before clicking. This often causes confusion for the cat as we send an inconsistent message about what is the correct behavior with inconsistent clicks. Think of your click as telling the cat, “Yes, that’s right!”

**Game Time: Version A:**

- *Using one die, toss it on a table. If you roll an even number, the “evens” person clicks as quickly as possible. If an odd number is rolled, the “odds” person clicks as quickly as possible. If you are using a deck of cards, make sure to shuffle the deck. You can use “evens” and “odds” or “reds” and “blacks” for this game with a deck of cards.*

**Game Time: Version B (Advanced):**

- *Using two dice, roll them on a table. Add the numbers on the dice, if the sum of the dice is an even number, the “evens” person clicks as quickly as possible. If the sum is an odd number, the “odds” person clicks as quickly as possible. With a deck of cards, divide the deck into two piles, turn two cards at once, and then add the numbers on the cards.*

***Be careful that you don’t anticipate a result! It is easy to click accidentally if you are anticipating, not observing.***

## The Link: Timing Your Click

When the cat meets criteria, you should click as close to the exact moment when the cat meets criteria. The closer the click is to the completion of the behavior, the more likely it is that the cat will associate the click which means, “Yes! That’s Right!” with the behavior you intended to reinforce. If your clicks are inconsistent, your cat will likely give you inconsistent behavior. A popular saying is, “You get more of what you click,” not necessarily what you think you are clicking. The cat is always right! The click is the link between your observation skills (you click at the end of your observation) and mechanical skills (you click at the beginning of your mechanical skills).

**Game Time:** *Make sure your clicks based on the dice or cards are as quick as possible. Also, this is a good time to practice holding the clicker in different ways: in your pocket and just tap the button, in your hand (possibly attached to your arm with a wrist coil), or under your foot on the floor. You will learn what is most comfortable for you. It is also a good idea to practice not pointing the clicker (if you are holding it in your hand) toward the dice or cards when you click. It isn’t a remote control, even though our muscle memory built up over years of practice is to “point and click.”*



## Mechanical Skills: Delivering a Reinforcer

When you are delivering a reinforcer, you should not move the hand with the reinforcer (treat, toy, or for petting) until after you click. This is very hard to do! If you consistently move your hand (which you will do if you are anticipating clicking) with the reinforcer before the click happens, your cat may start to ignore the click and instead watch your reinforcer hand. Pick a neutral position to place your reinforcer hand (like your belly button) until after you click. As soon as you finish delivering the reinforcer, return your reinforcer hand to the neutral position.

**Game Time:** *With two cups in front of you, fill one cup about half way with small candies or beans. The other cup should be empty. With your reinforcer hand in the neutral position, click the clicker. As soon as you click, use the reinforcer hand to remove one candy from the first cup and place it in the second cup. Then, place your reinforcer hand back to neutral. You can see how many you can get in a minute. You can also have judges enforce penalties (removing a candy from the second cup after delivery) if you move your reinforcer hand before you click! Then, after you are done...enjoy the candies (reinforcers!) in the second cup!*

## Putting It All Together, Part One

After you have played the *observational skills + the link* and *mechanical skills* games separately, put them all together in order! Observe, then click, then reinforce!

**Game Time:** Roll the di (or dice or turn the card(s)), the appropriate person clicks, moves their reinforcer hand from neutral to deliver a candy from the full cup to the other cup. The clicking person, then rolls the di (or dice or turns the card(s)) and then returns their reinforcer hand to neutral.



## Putting It All Together, Part Two: “This is WAR!”

We get it: Playing clicker skill games can feel silly. An awesome way to get people more relaxed and into the skill practice session is to play a game of [War](#). The following game idea came to us from Cat Pawsitive shelter Homeward Bound- Addison County’s Humane Society. We think you’ll like it. 😊

(If you don’t know how to play War, check out this link: <https://bicyclecards.com/how-to-play/war/> )

*“We had a blast with the clicker training practice! We did the first two rounds by the book, but we made the third round-- the combination of observation and mechanical skills-- into a little competition. Rather than just doing even/odd or red/blue with the cards, we played the card game War.*

*“Whoever drew the highest card had to click and treat. If you messed up, you lost your treats. The winner of each round was the team member with the most M&Ms in their cup. The winners of the two rounds then squared off against each other. The Ultimate Clicker Challenge winner received the remainder of the bag of M&Ms as their prize!*

*“The clicker skills training started off a bit awkward and stiff, but once we got to the competition we all loosened up and had fun!”-- Michelle S. at Homeward Bound, Addison County’s Humane Society*



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