



House Rabbit Network

Clicker Training Your Rabbit

by Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin

Jump! Spin! Come when you call – YES you can train your rabbit to do these things and beyond. More than just wriggling noses and long ears, rabbits go way beyond cute and are intelligent fun-loving pets.

Clicker training is a marker-based system of teaching in which a click sound is used to tell the rabbit, “Yes – that was right!” The precision and consistency of the click sound make this a far superior approach to the use of food without a marker or to the use of just a verbal marker (such as “good” or “yes”). The click is always followed closely with a food treat so that the rabbit comes to associate the click with something desirable. Soon the click becomes a positive reinforcer for the rabbit and he will begin to try to elicit a click and treat from you. There is no scolding, correction or punishment in clicker training. Mistakes are simply ignored.

Training is fun for you and your bun, and helps to develop a bond between human and animal. Finding food, creating homes, and staying safe all require various activities and problem solving, most of which are not required of a rabbit living in a cage or a human house. By providing training sessions for your bunny you are allowing him to use his natural abilities and providing mental and physical stimulation. This will contribute to a happier life for your pet. Rabbits can have lots of fun doing tricks, but if you are not interested in tricks, you can use clicker training to teach your bunny to be more confident and learn useful and even potentially life-saving skills such as coming when called, going back to his cage on cue, cooperating with nail clipping, getting into a basket or carrier, and eating when he is ill. Shelter rabbits can benefit from clicker training since they can be taught to come happily to the front of their cages and interact with potential adopters, thus making them more adoptable.

Getting Started

To begin with clicker training, you need a clicker and treats that your rabbit loves. Be sure that the rabbit has free access to ample hay and fresh water at all times. The best treats to use for clicker training are small and able to be consumed quickly. Give only a very small amount of sweet or new foods at one time.

Wait for the rabbit to do something, take a step, look at you, move a paw, any movement and then click and treat. The click must occur at the exact moment that the bunny performs the movement that is being marked. A few short sessions may be required

before the rabbit seems to get the idea. Soon the rabbit will try to repeat behaviors that earned a click and a treat - and the game is on!

Adding a Cue

A cue tells the rabbit what you want it to do in order to receive the click and treat. This can be a word or a hand signal. Once a rabbit is reliably offering a behavior, a cue can be added at the same time as the behavior is happening. For example if you have placed a low jump between the rabbit and his litter box and the rabbit jumps over the jump in order to get to the box, you can click during the jump (and treat when the rabbit lands) to indicate that this is desired behavior. When the jumping is happening reliably, you can start saying the word “jump” as the rabbit jumps and then before the jump. Now you have a rabbit that jumps in response to the verbal cue “jump” and you can begin to make the jumps higher or longer or add more jumps to the sequence.

Touch a Target

You can teach a rabbit to touch and then follow a target (a ping pong ball on the end of a pen for example). Hold the target in the vicinity of the rabbit and click/treat for looking at the target, then for any movement in the direction of the target, then for actually touching the target with his nose. This incremental building of a behavior one small step at a time is called shaping. Soon the rabbit will follow the target and you can use this to lead him and to teach other things such as come when called, go into or come out of his cage, and get into a basket.

Fading the Clicker and Treats

Every time the rabbit hears a click he must receive a treat. This establishes a bond of trust. It is not necessary to use the clicker forever, though. Once a behavior has been learned and put on cue, the click/treat can be faded by using it less frequently and then only intermittently to keep the behavior strong.

You will simply be amazed at how smart your bunny is!

Joan and Teresa are the co-creators of the Doggone Crazy! Board game and Clicker Puppy training DVD (www.doggonecrazy.ca), co-founders of Doggone Safe (www.doggonesafe.com) and co-authors of the newly published book, “Getting Started: Clicking with Your Rabbit” (www.clickerbunny.com). Teresa offers consulting and workshop services to shelters and rabbit clubs wishing to implement clicker training programs.



Clicker training with Oreo on his bridge.



Teaching bunny to "touch a target" and then follow.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Be sure rabbit is healthy, is receiving adequate nutrition, and has free access to hay and water at all times in its condo.
2. Use good treats – the reward must be more interesting to the rabbit than distractions in the environment.
3. Be patient – allow the rabbit ample time and opportunity to explore the training area (this may take more than one session).
4. Provide the rabbit with a comfort zone – a non-slip mat and litter box and perhaps even a covered box where he can hide if necessary.
5. Click and treat in the cage at first if the rabbit is nervous on the outside.
6. Work in a low distraction environment at first – use barriers and remove anything that you do not want the rabbit to investigate.
7. Keep sessions short – 5 minutes is plenty at first.
8. Rabbits are easily bored – repeat one thing only a few times per session.
9. Use several different types of treats in each session and reserve special treats only for training.
10. Use jackpots – larger or special treats to acknowledge especially good performance.

Favorite Treats: Raisins (max 3 per day), Carrots (max 3 inches per day), Romaine lettuce, Dandelion leaves, Parsley, Timothy hay pellets, Banana (max 1 inch per day), Apple (max 10 bites per day)

