

A
Karen Pryor



Clicker
Book

Getting Started:

Clicking

with Your Rabbit

Joan Orr
and
Teresa Lewin



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Getting Started: Clicker Training for Horses by Alexandra Kurland
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Getting Started: Clicking with Your Rabbit
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CHAPTER 1

What? Train a Rabbit?

Rabbits ... furry and lovable, of course; quirky and silly, sometimes; full of energy and mischief, undoubtedly. But trainable? You bet! You're probably training your rabbit without even realizing it. Is he litter box trained? Does he come to see you when you go to his cage? Then you've already taken your first steps toward training.

There's so much more your rabbit can learn! Have you ever seen a rabbit fetch? Or play basketball? (Rabbit-sized, of course.) What about navigating a course of jumps and tunnels? These are all tricks you can teach your pet bunny. You can also teach him some tricks to make your life together easier. How would you like it if your rabbit sat still while you trimmed his nails or came when you called his name? All it takes is a little training.

Training is actually good for your rabbit. When it is all positive—rewards only and no punishment—training can replace many of the activities and thinking that rabbits do naturally in



What! Train a rabbit? Of course you can!

the wild. Finding food, creating homes, and staying safe all require various activities and problem solving; most of these things are not required of a pet living in a cage or a human house. Training sessions provide your pet with mental and physical stimulation, and allow him to use his natural abilities. This will contribute to a longer and happier life for your rabbit.

Many rabbits languish in their cages most of their lives, but your trained bunny will delight you with tricks and antics. You will be eager to take him out of his cage and explore further possibilities—and he will be eager to explore them with you.

This positive method of training is popularly known as clicker training, and it is a great way to teach your rabbit all sorts of things. Clicker training is fun for both you and your bunny and helps to strengthen the bond between you. According to clicker training pioneer Karen Pryor, “Clicking with rabbits brightens their lives, exercises their surprisingly lively minds, and brings out their endearing personalities. They’ll love training you to click and treat! It’s easy to learn, and mentally and physically enriching for pets and their owners.”

CLICKER TRAINING DEFINED

What exactly is clicker training? It is a teaching system in which a click sound is used to tell the rabbit he has done the right thing. The click sound is made by using a small, handheld device that clicks when pressed. The sound the clicker makes when you press it tells your rabbit, “Yes! That’s right!” The click is always followed closely with a food treat so that your pet comes to associate the click with something good. Soon the rabbit wants to hear the click sound. This is because he knows a treat will follow and this makes him feel happy and secure.

Clicker training teaches the bunny that he can cause you to click, and then give him a treat, through his own actions. Let's say, for example, that you click and treat each time he comes toward you in his cage. Soon he will actively try to get you to click by coming toward you when you come near the cage. Next you will be able to add a verbal cue (a command) and your bunny will start coming to you when you call. "It's very exciting to see an animal experience the 'Aha!' moment when he suddenly realizes that he can actively control the clicker game," said Pryor.

Any treat that you can give to your rabbit that he desires and that motivates him to repeat a behavior is called a reinforcer. A treat can be food, petting, freedom, or a chance to play with a favorite toy. Food treats are the strongest reinforcers for most rabbits, and we recommend that you begin training your rabbit with food treats.

In clicker training, you influence a pet's behavior in two ways. The first is positive reinforcement, in which you reward your pet with a click and treat when he does something you like and want him to do again. The other way you influence behavior is simply to ignore behavior that you don't like. Behavior that is reinforced will become stronger; behavior that is ignored tends to fade away. Punishment, scolding, or physical correction are not used in clicker training.



When the rabbit hears the click sound he knows a treat will follow, which makes him feel happy and secure.

CLICKER TRAINING BASICS

In clicker training, you:

- Reward desired behavior
- Ignore unwanted behavior
- Do not use punishment, scolding, or physical correction

You may be wondering, “Why do I need the clicker? Why can’t I just give my rabbit a treat without the click sound? Why can’t I just say ‘good boy’ to my bunny rather than clicking?”

We click because the sound is clear, consistent, and precise. A word can be spoken in different ways. An animal may not recognize the same word if spoken in a different tone. The rabbit knows that the click means a treat is coming, every time.

A click can be made at exactly the same time the animal does the behavior we want to reward. It is difficult to say a word at precisely the same moment as the behavior; usually a spoken word comes a moment later. When the click occurs

at the same instant as the behavior, the rabbit knows exactly what he did to deserve a treat. It is not usually possible to deliver a treat exactly at the same time a behavior occurs, especially if your rabbit is in a cage or across the room from you.

The click lets you “mark” the desired behavior exactly,



Angel gets clicks and treats for exploring her new play house.

telling your rabbit: “This is what you are doing that will earn you a treat.” If you simply give a treat, the rabbit may have done several other behaviors by the time he actually receives the treat. He may then be confused about which behavior or which aspect of the behavior resulted in the treat, and therefore will not know what behavior to repeat in order to earn another treat.

For example, perhaps you are trying to teach your bunny to come to the door of the cage. He has done so, but by the time you open the door to give the food reward, the bunny has already become frustrated and started chewing on the door. You give the treat because the bunny came to the door, but he associates the reward with chewing on the door. You may have inadvertently taught your rabbit to chew on his cage door to get a treat. If you use the clicker to instantly “mark” the appropriate behavior of coming to the door, then he will learn that the correct behavior is to come to the door of the cage. You will be amazed by how smart your bunny is! All he needs is to be able to communicate effectively with you, and you with him. The clicker makes this possible.

CLICKER TRAINING WORKS

There are hundreds of thousands of clicker trainers around the world, training almost every conceivable captive species. Why? Because clicker training works! It works with dolphins and birds that you’ve seen in trained animal shows. It works with search-and-rescue dogs. It works with elephants and tigers, and even with turtles and fish.

Clicker training is also making a difference in the lives of shelter animals waiting for adoption. Many animal shelters have begun clicker training with their rabbits, dogs, and ferrets.

Andrea Bratt Frick and Jean Silva of B.U.N.S. (Bunnies Urgently Needing Shelter) in California have been clicker training shelter rabbits to enrich their lives and make them more adoptable. Jean Silva says, “Once you get started and learn how to use the clicker, you and your rabbit become ‘hooked.’ It is simple to use, and the results are so powerful! We have been using the clicker to get all our bunnies to come to the front of their cages to appear friendly to help them become more adoptable. Also, we have taught them little tricks such as ‘Gimme Ten’ so that the bunnies (who were fearful at first) would interact with potential adopters.”

Anyone Can Train a Rabbit

Who are all these clicker trainers? They are people just like you. Some are adults, some are kids, some are professional trainers, and some are shelter volunteers. Anyone who can press a clicker and give a pet a treat can clicker train. Sometimes beginners train in teams, with one person clicking and the other treating. This is a good way for new clicker trainers to learn because one person focuses on handling the animal and pressing the clicker, and the other on delivering the treat quickly.

All Rabbits Can Be Trained

We have yet to encounter a rabbit that cannot be clicker trained. Some rabbits learn more quickly, some will work for longer periods, and some get bored easily. Any rabbit that can be motivated by something you have that he wants can be clicker trained. Sometimes it takes a bunny a few sessions to get used to the sound of the clicker or to associate the click with the treat. Some pets catch on right away. We have trained

many rabbits, and even within this one species there is a wide range of ability when it comes to learning new things.

The key to success with clicker training a rabbit is to understand your rabbit. Observe to see what he likes to eat, what kinds of behaviors he does naturally, and what kind of environment he prefers. Consult the resources listed in Chapter 8 (see page 79) to find out what others have observed about rabbits. You will want to know what type of home your rabbit likes, what toys and activities he prefers, how to keep him healthy, and what kinds of treats you can use for training. A wonderful aspect of clicker training your bunny is the time that you spend observing and playing with him. Once you understand what makes your bunny tick you can set up your training sessions to ensure success.



Bunnies can learn a lot! This clicker-trained bunny has learned to “weave” through a line of “carrot sticks” the way agility-trained dogs go through the weave pole obstacle.