

Talk to the Animals—

Clicker Training as a Communication Tool

By Joan Orr, M.Sc.

Dr. Dolittle is a fictional character who sparks the imaginations of children and adults alike with his ability to talk to the animals. Into his care come castaways and strays of all description and he befriends them, studies them and learns to speak their language. Dr. Doolittle represents an ideal for the humane treatment of animals and an important reason that his animals are happy is that they can communicate with him. Talking to the animals seems at first glance as a fanciful notion, far removed from reality, but maybe it is not so far-fetched. Maybe there is a way to talk to the animals.

In the 1940s, Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner began experimenting with the application of scientific principles of animal behavior to the practical training of animals. Keller and Marian Breland, among other students of B.F. Skinner and his followers, utilized the power of a conditioned positive reinforcer as a training tool. The technology, called operant conditioning, is the basis for the spectacular marine mammal shows seen at modern aquarium facilities. The incredible leaps and spins and complex behavior chains exhibited by dolphins in these



shows demonstrates the effect of clear communication between the trainer and the animal. Dolphins cannot be trained with physical force or induced with threats to execute a joyful performance. Instead marine mammal trainers used a marker signal in the form of a whistle paired with food reward to strengthen natural behaviors and put them on cue (hand or voice commands) in order to create the amazing effects seen in the dolphin show. The highly successful use of this method with dolphins led to the popular myth that they are the smartest of all animals, maybe even

close to humans in their level of intelligence.

The Brelands formed a company through which they also trained many other species of animals for television and other commercial applications. They used a marker signal from a handheld clicker (and other markers) with animals such as dogs, cats and birds that were working in closer proximity and not in a large aquarium tank. The term clicker training and the concept of its application to companion animals, particularly dogs, was popularized by Karen Pryor, author of the best selling book, *Don't Shoot the Dog, The New Art of Teaching and Training* which was first published in 1985.

There are now more than 300,000 clicker trainers around the world and the movement is growing quickly. Dog trainers were the first (after the marine mammal trainers) to pick up on this developing technology, but now many zoos and animal shelters are also finding that clicker training can give them results with their animals that were previously impossible. Clicker training provides a humane way to condition zoo animals to accept and even enjoy husbandry procedures. At a recent clicker training conference hosted by Karen Pryor Clicker Training, trainer

Angi Millwood showed dramatic footage of a rhinoceros willingly coming into a small enclosure to accept an injection and a cheetah being trained to present itself for a blood draw. Angi is the Associate Director of Behavior Programs with Natural Encounters Inc. and prior to that was the Animal Training Coordinator at the Fort Worth Zoo, responsible for the Zoo's animal training programs for more than 350 animal species. Through the use of clicker training and by studying and understanding the natural body language and behaviors of zoo animals, Angi and her colleagues around the world are getting closer to talking to the animals. The animals are talking back by offering cooperative behaviors and accepting procedures that previously would have required the highly stressful method of subduing them with a medicated dart.

Clickers are now being used in progressive animal shelters, thanks to the pioneering efforts of Karen Pryor and others. Pryor provides free instructional materials at her website www.clickertraining.com. The most dramatic effect of using the clicker in a shelter is the noise reduction which in turn reduces the stress level for both animals and staff. One dog is not barking; click and treat. There's another one; click and treat. This one is not jumping at the fence; click and treat. Soon all dogs learn that by their own actions (sitting quietly) they can induce the staff member to produce a click and a treat. This opens up a line of two-way communication between people and dogs and suddenly the dogs are quieter, less stressed, more trainable and most importantly more adoptable. New dogs and new staff



members can quickly learn the procedures from their peers. In a variation of this approach, Andrea Bratt-Frick of B.U.N.S. rabbit shelter in California, uses the click and treat method to encourage bunnies to come to the front of the hutches when people come to visit. She has also taught them to do cute tricks and to accept handling, which makes them more adoptable. Clicker training enriches the lives of shelter animals and gives both animals and handlers something fun and interesting to do while enhancing communication between the species.

Clicker training is not about dominating an animal and bossing it around. It is a way of building a strong bond of love and respect between people and animals. The animals benefit by learning to think and by having their lives enriched and the people benefit by gaining insight into the inner workings of an animal's mind. Clicker trainers begin to understand what their animal is thinking and why it behaves as it


does. A very important side effect of clicker training, especially for children, is the development of empathy. Human psychologists and behavior therapists have developed programs in conjunction with local animal shelters in which youth at risk from violence or at risk from perpetrating violence are given the responsibility of training a shelter dog using clicker training. Children marginalized by early experiences with violence and lacking in trust and empathy for people can learn through the relationship developed in clicker training a dog to understand and empathize with another creature. The processes and effects of one such program is described in the book *Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence* by Lynn Loar Ph.D. LCSW and Libby Coleman Ph.D.

The most recent manifestation of clicker training is a teaching method called TAGteach™ in which

Continued on page 11

the click sound is used to reinforce human performance. TAGteach is being used with child athletes to fast track athletic skill development and enhance improvement and enjoyment. The click sound is used as an audible “tag” placed on a correct response, action or position and it tells the student when they are right. Mistakes are ignored and there is no punishment or negative terminology used. Students can be the teacher and tag each other and in this way they become kind and caring teachers and demonstrate concern and empathy for their teammates.

Clicker training and TAGteaching are much more than just training methods. Young people learning and

using these methods will grow up to treat all animals and people humanely and with respect. They will learn to use positive reinforcement in all aspects of their lives and view this rather than violence or punishment as a normal way to influence the behavior of others. By promoting and teaching these methods to children we will be encouraging them to follow the example set by Dr. Dolittle to take the time to build positive relationships, understand the communication of others and come as close as possible to being able to talk to the animals. 

Author Joan Orr is a scientist with 20 years of experience in the application of scientific principles to study design and

data interpretation. She has trained dogs using positive reinforcement methods for more than 10 years and more recently has instructed others in clicker training techniques. She is a pioneer in the field of clicker training rabbits.

Joan holds a Bachelor's degree in Biology and Chemistry from the University of Waterloo and a Master's degree in Biochemistry from MacMaster University. She is the co-inventor, along with animal behaviorist Teresa Lewin, of the family fun board game Doggone Crazy!, a game that teaches children to read dog body language and act safely around dogs. She lives in Campbellville, a small village in Southern Ontario, with her husband, Dave, two daughters, a cat and two bunnies.

For additional information, please visit www.doggonecrazy.ca and see page 21 for clicker training resources.