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# Latham Letter

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*By Sarah Aguiniga*

## What a Difference a Year Makes

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# Clicker Training Shelter Animals

## with the Help of the New Generation



By Raquel Castellanos,  
Francisco Lin Martinez,  
Emma Prado, Radhika Prasad,  
Javier Valdez, Austin Werchick,  
and Lynn Loar

“ The students often identify with the shelter animals and this motivates them to master their own impulsivity and become patient, attentive and kind trainers. ”

Lynn Loar

When I say to my students in continuation high schools, “Let’s imagine that things work out well for you for the next several years. You’re now in your 20s. What does your life look like?” they really cannot answer. How do teachers and counselors get students to set clear goals for a promising future so they’ll see academic work as incremental steps toward those goals?

Many students learn by doing more readily than they learn in a classroom. They learn more – and more enthusiastically – when a compelling experience comes before they tackle the academics that underlie that experience.

Baden High School, a continuation school in South San Francisco, Calif., takes students twice a week to the Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA where they participate in animal care and training. There they meet people in positions of responsibility who take an interest in them, see potential in them, and give them the opportunity to see their own potential.

As alumna Sarah Aguiniga makes wonderfully clear (pages 6-7 of this issue), the dogs are often better teachers, counselors, and mentors than their human counter-

parts are. The dogs’ enthusiasm for working with the student trainers is far more reinforcing than the spoken word.

This article shows the first half of the journey that this year’s students are on. They have come to the shelter twelve times so far, and they have learned the basics of clicker training and how the shelter works. They have seen many of the dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, rats, and mice they have trained get adopted, and they know that their work contributed to the animals’ success in finding permanent homes.

The students write feedback after every class. Excerpts from their reflections follow here.

**Lynn:** *When did you feel most successful training a dog?*

**Rad:** My greatest experience was with a black lab mix. She was very shy and hesitant about coming toward me at first. After a while, she began to come closer to me and not run away with the treats after I had tossed them into her cage. This experience made me feel content with the way I was training and even more so to know that I helped her let go of her fear. It is important to make any animal you work with feel safe around you. Just like with us humans, trust is important to them too.

**Austin:** One of the best clicker training sessions was with a small black puppy. The first time he met our group he was very nervous and shy. He didn't want to get too close for too long. After we worked with the puppy a little, he got more confident and happy. Clicker training shows the dogs how to have good behavior and act better in front of people. The second time we met the puppy he was happy and energetic when he got in the training room and wasn't nervous at all. He caught on to the training game very fast. Clicker training showed me that dogs are a lot smarter than you think, and can catch on to a lot of stuff you do without noticing. I think that clicker training is very good for the dogs and makes them a lot more adoptable.

**Javier:** Clicker training showed me a way to communicate with dogs. If I like a behavior, I click and give the dog a treat. I also learned patience. I had a dog who barked. I didn't click. After a few barks, he stopped barking and I clicked for that. The dog knew right away what the behavior was that I wanted.



Rad and dog Pongo

Photos courtesy of Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA and Baden High School

“ Knowing that some of this new generation of kids will discover different opportunities in life and will be motivated to develop their skills gives us hope and makes our work worthwhile. ”

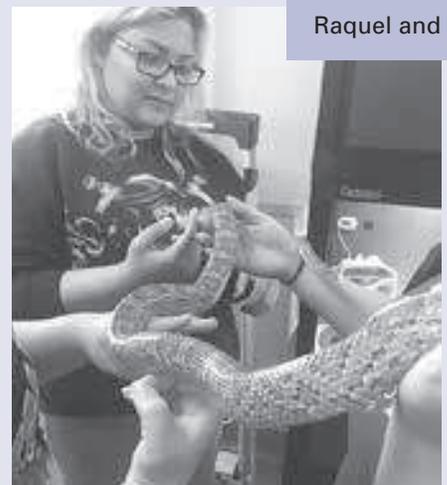
Maria Jose Eguren, CABC



Austin and JD



Javier and Griff



Raquel and snake

**Francisco:** Using patience and connecting with the dogs really pay off as they help the dogs become more adoptable. When I approach a dog, I use a positive approach so I don't seem like a threat. When I first worked with a little dog named "Mamas," she was very shy and I could tell she was scared. She was a very small dog so I sat on the floor so that I would not hover over her, but she still would not move towards me. Soon, while I sat on the floor, I started with a very slow positive approach. When she moved a little closer, I clicked and gave her a treat. Toward the end of my treats, I could see her mood change by how much closer she got as the trust grew.



**Emma:** At first, I worked with a dog who had a big howl. The dog would howl whenever I didn't pay attention to him or if I talked to anyone else. He enjoyed getting treats as long as I was paying attention to him. At first, his howl was very aggressive and he liked to jump a lot. I clicked and gave him a treat every time he would stop howling. I was lucky to be able to work with him several times and I would continue the same exercise. A couple of days later, he started to get the idea and then, after that, I tested him to see if he would howl. I kept the treat in front of him for

30 seconds and he didn't howl. Then I clicked and gave him the treat. He improved a lot! This improvement mattered because few dog owners would want their pet to howl, especially since he howled when he didn't get attention. This activity helped him become more adoptable.

## Counting Victories

In the world of continuation high school, victories can be few and far between. However, in the three years since Baden High School partnered with the Peninsula Humane Society and The Pryor Foundation, there have been many victories. The students who have passed through the program have carried with them their own life experiences and challenges. Truancy, depression, family issues, probation, and a lack of academic success are just some of the barriers students have encountered. It is difficult to cultivate patience, empathy, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging in the face of these obstacles. The goal of the partnership has been to take on that daunting task, and this has been accomplished with life-changing results.

This was particularly true this year, as an alumna of the program became a valued member of the Humane Society's volunteer group and has assisted in training this year's Baden cohort. In doing so, she is not only providing training to the high school students, but she is also an example of what they can become and what they can achieve. Her transformation has been an inspiration to the Humane Society staff, as well as to the school staff, as she displays the self-confidence, poise, and patience that we had hoped the program would instill. This is just one example of the victories that the partnership has achieved in the past three years, a victory that will provide motivation to continue meeting the needs of these students.

*Michael Coyne, Baden High School Principal*

Emma and Pongo





**Raquel:** I have had a lot of memorable experiences while training dogs, but one dog stood out. It all started when I saw a shy little pup walk in hunched over. I knew I would do whatever possible to make him more comfortable and adoptable. So all seven of us started off with the clicker. By the end of the first session, he left standing tall and his tail wagging. Later on he became extremely comfortable with us, and even went to meet a possible adopter after our class. All this put a smile on my face, making me feel that I've grown to be a better trainer.

**Lynn:** *How would your experience in school be different if your teachers used a positive approach like clicker training?*

**Javier:** Well, I know that I wouldn't be criticized for being too slow or for not knowing what I'm doing, and I wouldn't get nervous. On the first day at the shelter, I was pretty nervous, but when I came for the second time I felt more comfortable. When I go into my

next new challenge I think I will be more relaxed.

**Rad:** There was one teacher who taught in a way that made it difficult to learn. He would get aggravated easily and he was always yelling, but he wouldn't do anything about the students who were being disrespectful. His approach to teaching made it almost impossible to do well in his class, and made most students hesitant to do anything. As a result most of us took very little from that class, and that resulted in us needing extra help the next year to catch up. If the teacher who had very little patience in the classroom had used the clicker training technique, it would have helped us learn a great deal more. We would have known exactly what he wanted from us and exactly what he didn't want. There would have been a lot less aggravation as well, which would have been better for everyone. I think clicker training should be considered in the classroom.

**Austin:** Just a couple days ago, my friend and I were sitting next to each

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*Michael Coyne,  
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other in class. I asked him a question about the paper that we were working on, and the teacher immediately started yelling at us saying that we weren't paying attention and weren't doing our work. A few minutes after that, my friend said something, and the teacher



Francisco, Raquel, Rad, Emma, and Rambo

made him leave the class and go to the office. When teachers act too bossy or controlling, it makes the students feel like they are being controlled or forced to work which can make working a lot more difficult than it already is.

One example of a positive approach to teaching would be clicker training. If you start off with a positive approach to a dog, you and the animal will be on the same page, and the dog will catch on to what's going on faster. The dog will also get happier and more confident while learning new things.

**Raquel:** Not too long ago, when I was a freshman in high school, I had the worst English teacher. Whenever he would give us class work, there were minimal directions, and we would pretty much have to figure out the rest of it on our own. No one was able to say a word until we finished, so we had to sit there and wait until he came by to look our work over and criticize us. Eventually, he'd make us correct it as homework along with whatever else had been assigned from separate classes. Eventually I gave up on struggling to find out what he wanted, and that led me to fail the class.

Clicker training positively affects students' learning by assuring them that they're doing the right thing and completely ignoring whatever they did wrong. Along with that, I believe that positive training increases the students' motivation. Pointing out wrongdoings is not the way to motivate them.

**Emma:** I take violin lessons. Every time I learn new notes on my violin, my teacher makes me feel a little nervous because she seems impatient. This makes me feel that I should hurry up and play it correctly. I think this

This program is all about creating positive learning experiences and teaching new skills. While working with shelter animals, the students from Baden High School become the teachers. They realize the importance of adjusting their approach to the learning style and pace of their trainees. The reward-based training makes their efforts successful, which makes them think about their own experiences as students and how those experiences could be improved. I very much enjoy being part of this program because it not only provides me with useful information about the animals' behavior, but more importantly, it is extremely rewarding to see the students' transformations over time. Knowing that some of this new generation of kids will discover different opportunities in life and will be motivated to develop their skills gives us hope and makes our work worthwhile.

**Maria Jose Eguren, CABP**

*Director of Animal Behavior and Training, Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA*

teaching method is okay but teaching with fear and can make the learner scared to try new things. Just like I am afraid to play the wrong note, a dog could be afraid to make the wrong move. Praising students will help them want to do better and make them feel confident, proud, happy, and excited. With clicker training, the click is a sign of a good deed. If it takes a while for them to figure something out, encourage them so they feel comfortable. When they figure it out, give them double the treats.

**Francisco:** This positive approach affects your attitude and willingness to tackle bigger tasks because you are getting rewarded. If you achieve your goal in finishing a task, your confidence in taking bigger challenges will increase. Your willingness will also increase because you are not getting irritated because you're doing the task wrong.

If teachers were to use this method (clicker training), I think Baden's top credit earner percentage would increase as well as our individual education. If

teachers were pointing out everything we did right, it would help us change our attitudes by wanting to do the work and feeling more interested in the topic.

**Lynn:** *Our students have learned that they can make a difference in the lives of other living creatures by teaching them to overcome their fear of people and learn good manners. The students often identify with the shelter animals and this motivates them to master their own impulsivity and become patient, attentive and kind trainers. They can look at Sarah, a year their senior, and follow her path to success.*

#### **About the author**

*Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker and the president of the Pryor Foundation, [www.thepryorfoundation.org](http://www.thepryorfoundation.org), an organization that promotes methods that facilitate behavioral change exclusively through positive reinforcement. She and Libby Colman are the co-authors of Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence.*

