

The Strategic Humane Interventions Program (SHIP) Teaches Positive Interactions to Battered Mothers and Their Children in Cincinnati

By Barbara Boat, Ph.D.

Photos are not SHIP program participants. They are for illustration only.



The Need

The six mothers and their 15 children are housed in a transitional living apartment complex for battered women. In many ways, these are the “lucky” families. These courageous women have made the difficult decision to leave their abusive partners, spent up to 30 days at the battered women’s shelter and, subsequently, made the even more difficult decision to not return home – ever. In seeking a safer life for themselves and their children, they live in TLP, the Transitional Living Project, run by the Greater Cincinnati YWCA. For up to two years the women are offered job counseling, employment support, skills training and therapy groups. “But we need more,” said Theresa Singleton, director of the program. “We need an intervention that connects these moms and their kids. They have been through so much shared hurt and violence. They need to have some good experiences and learn new ways to be gentle and positive with each other.”

Enter SHIP: The Strategic Humane Interventions Program

Developed by Lynn Loar, Ph.D., in 1999, on its surface SHIP appears to focus participants on using clicker training to teach “good manners” to homeless shelter dogs to help them become more adoptable. In reality, we used SHIP as a delivery mechanism for teaching positive people interaction skills to the battered mothers and their children. As Karen Pryor writes “The SHIP program is about learning. It begins with families learning to teach the shelter dogs to sit, to make eye contact, to touch a held-out hand, and to respond when called. Children wielding clickers and treats can teach these simple behaviors and experience success (the dogs experience success, too, of course). Families witness and participate in the process. The techniques for interacting through positive reinforcement can be rapidly assimilated and transferred to interfamily processes, without verbal instruction.” (Loar and Colman, 2004, p. 80)

The Program Components of SHIP

One strength of SHIP is its adaptability to specific settings. In our program for battered mothers and their children, we developed a seven-week program.

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Based on feedback from an initial pilot, we found that learning the clicker skills was most beneficial to children who were at least eight years old. However, the mothers had younger children as well. We were able to arrange for child care during the 75 minute sessions. In addition, Lynn Loar had advised on the importance of feeding families. Our program was held in the early evening and many mothers worked all day. So we provided a simple supper before each session for all family members.



Behind the Scenes Preparation

At the heart of the SHIP program were our volunteer dog trainer experts and our close collaboration with our local animal shelter, SPCA Cincinnati. The dog trainers “suitability tested” and transported three shelter dogs to each weekly session. We used two dogs in the session but had a spare in case a chosen dog evidenced an unforeseen negative reaction. Our trainers were exceptionally gifted and committed to the program. For 30 minutes they were in charge, running two concurrent groups to teach clicker skills to the mothers and their children.

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It also was important to gather all the necessary materials for each session. Materials included name tags for staff and participants, clickers, lots of candy (initially no chocolate candy was used), and waiter’s aprons with pockets to hold dog treats or candy for the “training game.” We had graduate certificates, handouts on clicker training developed by two of Lynn Loar’s young protégés, Hilary Louie and Evelyn Pang, titled “Teaching with a Clicker: How to Train



People and Animals with a Clicker and Treats,” (Loar and Colman, 2004) and materials on how to be safe around dogs. In addition to our dog trainer volunteers, we had volunteer staff from Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, the Greater Cincinnati YWCA, SPCA Cincinnati, and Xavier University.

The Program

The SHIP schedule during the 75 minute program was as follows:

- Clicker Practice
- Dog Introductions
- Dog Training with Clickers and Dog Treats
- Playing the Training Game
- Clicker Project Homework and Clicker Promise Pledge

Clicker Practice involved participants standing in a semicircle. A staff member demonstrated when a click should occur, e.g., “When my two hands come together and touch each other.” This exercise helped the children and mothers watch carefully for a behavior and time each click. The new clickers from Sunshine Books worked very well with our participants.

Dog Introductions were an essential component of the program. If a participant was fearful, he or she could simply stand behind a chair. Others remained seated and held out a hand for the dog to sniff as it toured the semicircle with our animal shelter volunteer. This volunteer also told the history of the dog, which was often quite sad. As one young boy

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said, “These dogs are homeless, just like us.” You can imagine the applause when the following week the volunteer would announce that one of our dogs had been adopted! The volunteer also instructed the group on how to be safe around dogs. One younger girl who stood behind her chair for the first four sessions was videotaped at session five with a small dog on her lap!

Dog Training with Clickers and Dog Treats focused on behaviors that would enhance the dog’s adoptability such as coming when called, sitting, and looking people in the eye. Often mothers and children would work in teams with one clicking the behavior and the other feeding the treat.

Playing the Training Game was great fun. The Training Game is described in detail in Loar and Colman’s wonderful book *Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence* (Latham Foundation, 2004). One person is the trainer and one person is the learner. We paired each dyad with a “coach” who was one of our staff members. The trainer and coach decided on the task for the learner to perform. The trainer then guided the learner to figure out what the task was (e.g. touch a light switch) by using only the clicker and candy treats.

The rules of the Training Game are 1) Choose tasks that the learner can perform and the trainer can teach by clicking and treating; 2) Choose tasks that the learner would be comfortable performing; 3) Avoid

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(Loar and Colman, 2004, p. 80)

touching people or the belongings of others; and 4) Avoid interacting with the dogs if they are present.

Participants loved the Training Game, laughing and applauding when they were successful. Moreover, they were learning to click for behaviors that they wanted – the DO behaviors, rather than the DON’T behaviors.

The **Clicker Project Homework** in later sessions enabled participants to apply their new skills to interpersonal situations in their home settings. Each family member decided on a behavior in another family member that he or she would click and treat at home during the week. The most challenging part of the assignment was to think about positive behaviors to reinforce rather than stopping negative behaviors. A parent would say “I want Jose to quit being so grouchy.” We changed the focus to clicking and treating Jose every time she saw him smile. A teenager said, “I want Mom to quit yelling at me to do the dishes.” We changed this request to clicking and treating her mom for asking her in a calm voice to do the dishes.

We practiced the target behaviors before the families went home so all participants were clear about what behaviors would be clicked and treated during the week. The mothers and their children took their clickers and treats home along with a signed **Clicker Promise Pledge** to use the clicker as it was intended. At the next SHIP session we debriefed all the participants on the success of their homework project and each mother and child then selected new target behaviors for their Clicker Project Homework to work on during the following week.

Feedback

WCPO Channel 9, a TV station in Cincinnati, interviewed and taped several of our participants at the end of SHIP. The words of the





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mothers best capture the impact of the SHIP experience on their changed relationships with their children and with the dogs:

- A mother with two teenaged daughters laughed: “SHIP teaches you to work as a family. This daughter says the dog’s name, ‘Honey.’ I click and my other daughter treats!”
- Mother: “I learned I need to reward my children when they do good things and not focus on the bad things.”
- Mother: “I learned I may not get what I want the first time. I just need to be patient.”
- Mother: “Like with the dogs. Just be gentle with each other and approach each other in a calm way.”

Finally, our mothers and their children said they wished the program had lasted longer. We, the volunteer staff, had the dual satisfaction of knowing we

had enhanced the interpersonal skills of our battered mothers and their children, and the mothers and children had, indeed, helped our homeless dogs become more adoptable. 🐾

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