



# Clicker Training with At-Risk Families

By Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW



Three months ago, I began introducing clicker training to at-risk families. Marcia Mayeda with the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley and her three large dogs joined me. I rounded up several families stagnating on a colleague's case load, mired in negative exchanges and unduly harsh with their children. All the children, ranging in age from seven to thirteen, did badly in school due to poor behavior and assorted learning and emotional disabilities. The participants yelled at each other and at the dogs throughout the first session. I could readily see why their therapist had been glad to refer them to me.

I began the second session by saying it was not necessary to yell or even talk to get desired behavior from the dogs. I took out a clicker and some chopped tofu hot dogs and began to teach one of Marcia's dogs to touch a target stick. The room fell silent; people watched in astonishment as the dog quickly and happily learned to touch his nose to the stick. On their own initiative, they then picked up clickers and began to try to teach the same skill to the other dogs. No yelling, no criticizing, just quiet work and gentle praise as people and dogs figured the clicking business out.

Half way through the hour, we gave the dogs a break and began to play the training game ourselves. People learned the basics almost immediately as I clicked them to do various tasks like washing their hands, moving something on the counter or turning off the light.

The third week was lots of fun and people became fascinated by the training game. Over time, they focused more on it than on the dogs because it taught them how to learn and how to teach. It also taught them empathy through the necessary concentration the teacher has on the learner. The group was quiet and diligent, enthusiastic and democratic, with parents clicking children and children clicking parents. Encouragement and praise were offered spontaneously and accepted readily. Within a month we had built a new repertoire of positive behaviors and speech and never again saw the old patterns that had dominated the first session. Confidence and self-esteem grew along with skill. As one child said, "It's so much fun, you don't realize how much you are learning." Unlike traditional therapy, attendance was not only excellent but presented a novel problem: people on occasion brought extended family to the sessions because they were so enjoyable.

Clicker training lets people build the skills they need to choose gentle competence over punishment or force when the going gets rough. It makes people happier, more relaxed and more effective, behaviors incompatible with abuse and neglect. And it's not just for people in trouble. Clicker training will make you a better student, teacher, friend, colleague, and parent as Morgan Spector shows in the touching and inspiring article that follows.

