

Clicker training with at-risk families succeeds at the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley

by Marcia Mayeda

Earlier this year I participated in a pilot program introduced by Lynn Loar to teach clicker training to at-risk families. As the Director of Community Outreach for the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley (HSSCV), I was very excited about the possibility of identifying innovative and profound ways in which the Humane Society could affect issues of family violence in our community.

My role in this project was to supply volunteers with temperament-tested dogs. The dogs would serve each week as the initial models in introducing concepts of clicker training. By watching how the dogs learned, the participants would understand the new concepts being introduced and move on to using such behavior modification methods with each other.

As this was a pilot project I volunteered my own time, along with three of my dogs: Carlisle, a nine-year-old male Landseer Newfoundland; Montana, a nine-year-old German Shepherd; and Henry, a one and a half-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever. All three dogs had passed their Canine Good Citizen tests along with additional HSSCV screening protocols. Carlisle, a former shelter dog, had already served for several years as a regular visitor in our Kids & Kindness school enrichment programs, where he helped elementary school children learn the importance of respect for all living creatures.

There were three families in the initial pilot program group, consisting of the three mothers and five children. Many of the participants were initially

afraid of my dogs. Carlisle and Henry are very large, and Montana, a German Shepherd, frightened some of the participants due to the negative stigma of her breed. I realized that most of the experiences the participants had had with large dogs were negative ones – the dogs they were familiar with were guard or protection dogs and were not necessarily given to socialization.

One mother visibly panicked when Carlisle approached her. Carlisle's nickname is "Face" because it is his habit to walk up to people when they're seated and place his face in theirs, hoping for a pat or hug. However, I had to be mindful that Carlisle's gentle nature might not be obvious to others and guided him to other participants. This woman's son learned that Montana knew how to "speak" and began tormenting his mother with Montana's sharp barks. I had to end that as well. What surprised me was that the mother didn't instruct her son to stop this harassing behavior. It showed me that there were unwanted behaviors in that family that could be addressed through this program.

The children and other adults were enamored with the dogs and began petting them and asking questions about them. Their breeds, ages, weights, and repertoire of tricks were all of great interest. The participants were given brushes to physically interact with the dogs, who loved the attention. After everyone was introduced, we began handing out dog treats. Then we provided peanut butter and crackers for the people, and eventually the participants began giving peanut butter to the dogs. Watching dogs scrape peanut butter off the roofs of

their mouths with their tongues was a very effective icebreaker!

The dogs also served as excellent subject matter in discussing behavioral concerns. I was asked how I handled misbehavior in my dogs, and was able to give responses that could be translated into considerate ways of responding to misbehavior in children. For example, I was asked what I would do when my dogs barked at strangers at the door. Would I yell at them, throw things at them, or hit them?

I described how I understood it was in the dogs' nature to alert me to the presence of visitors, and to expect different behavior wasn't reasonable on my part. I explained that yelling, throwing, or hitting would not stop the dogs from barking. However, there were things I could do to prevent such occurrences, and that preventing misbehavior was much easier than correcting it once it had occurred.

I told the group that I took steps to ensure my dogs were "set up for success" to prevent annoying me unnecessarily. I know when the postal worker will deliver my mail, so I make sure my dogs are in the back area of the house at that time. When I order a pizza I lock the dogs in the other room to get my food quietly. The families realized there were things they could do to prevent unwanted situations in their homes as well, without resorting to anger or physical force.

Over the next eight weeks the participants grew in skill and confidence as they began clicker training the dogs and each other. The progression of their successes was well described in the last issue of the Latham Letter, but I would like to report on one boy's achievements in particular and how they illustrate the effectiveness of this program.

This five-year-old boy, whom I will call Max (not his real name), attended with his mother. His father, who had been extremely physically abusive to the mother, was in prison. Max was strongly bonded to his mother due to the abuse he had witnessed, and was unwilling to engage in any conversation or activity with the other participants or animals. He had problems focusing in school and was often in trouble with his teachers. He spent the first session sitting on a chair and staring at the floor in front of him.

The other participants began learning how to shape behaviors with the clickers and were thoroughly enjoying the activity. Max did not want to participate, even when the participants began clicking each other through activities whose rewards were generous amounts of candy. This continued for a couple more sessions.

Finally at about the third or fourth session Max began interacting with Henry. Henry is not your typical high-energy, active Labrador Retriever. In fact, he came to our home via Guide Dogs for the Blind. Originally bred to assist visually impaired clients at that organization, Henry was dropped from the program because he was too interested in food (or anything that resembled it) and playing, and not particularly attracted to physical activity. Guide Dogs also requires that their dogs weigh no more than 90 pounds. At the height of Henry's training when he was walking six to eight miles per day, six days per week, he was still 92 pounds. While this made him unsuitable as a Guide Dog, he fit perfectly into our home and this program.

Now well over 110 pounds, Henry's size could be intimidating. However, his gentle, calm nature and intense

interest in food made him approachable to Max. When Max asked Henry to sit, and Henry immediately complied, Max was ecstatic. This success was tremendously important for him. He had reached out to another creature and was immediately rewarded. His confidence was boosted and he had pride in his accomplishment.

After that, Henry was Max's favorite dog. At every session Max couldn't wait to see Henry and begin clicker training with him. During the second half of each session, when people

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clicked each other instead of the dogs, Max would hold Henry's leash or lie with him on the floor, using him as a cushion. Henry loved Max and knew he was there for him.

Even more heartening was seeing Max volunteer to join the rest of the group in the clicking activities. He allowed others to click him through the game, and even reached out by taking the responsibility to click others. He gained confidence and focus.

Max's mother told his teacher about the new activities Max was participating in. She asked his teacher to compliment Max on his good behavior, and ignore his bad behavior, consistent with the clicker training methodology. After several weeks the teacher reported that this approach worked wonders with Max and he had made a dramatic

turnaround in school. She reported that Max had taught himself how to stay focused, and would even “click” himself back on target. At home, Max had gone a record number of days in a row earning good behavior points.

At the last session, Max's mother told us how he was willing and able to attend his very first birthday party without her. He spent hours at the party, playing appropriately with the other children, and enjoyed himself. He has been able to join team sports that, due to previous behavioral problems he was not welcome to participate in. The last I've heard he is no longer in counseling because of the successful effect of this program, and he kisses the picture he has of Henry every night before he goes to bed.

Participating in this program showed me how successful clicker training can be in reaching others. Its nonverbal means of communication eliminate negative voice inflections and harsh words. The nonphysical aspects of the communication ensure that participants are not manhandled or treated with physical force. The families readily learned and participated in the program, and enjoyed it so much they played it as a game at home. Clearly, marker-based shaping of behaviors has great promise for at-risk families to replace negative behavior patterns with positive ones and help these at-risk families embark on healthier, more productive, relationships.

Marcia Mayeda has worked at the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley for seven years. She currently directs the cruelty investigations, volunteer, community outreach, education, and animal behavior programs. She and her husband Vincent live in San Jose.

