



From Frenzy to Focus

By Emma Parsons

When I am giving my “Click to Calm” seminars, a couple of questions invariably come up: “How do I get my dog to pay attention to me during an agility trial? How do I keep my dog from going ‘nuts’ when another dog is running the course?”

These handlers then explain how, in class, their dogs manage to stay focused, but at a trial, become so frenzied or overwhelmed by the stimuli in the environment that they cannot function and cannot perform the obstacles efficiently.

Agility trials are fast-paced and intense. Dogs and handlers wait eagerly for the chance to complete their courses quickly and accurately. No wonder, then, that in this highly distracting, intense environment, competitors may become reactive to the barrage of stimuli swirling about them.

The biggest challenge for a handler is to teach a dog to concentrate on cue and to remain attentive to direction until the completion of the course. For this to happen, a dog must be taught to “think” in the midst of all this chaos. In addition, because dogs are in close proximity to each other at agility trials, one reacting dog may cause a chain reaction as others explode in response.

With clicker training, however, we can sculpt our dog’s emotions no matter how intense the environment. We can teach our dogs to remain calm despite the heavy distractions surrounding them. Then they can focus on us, their handlers, and perform the obstacles to the best of their ability. We can also teach them to tolerate another dog’s rude behaviors that might otherwise trigger an aggressive response.

Clicker training, a positive-reinforcement training system, is based on the principles of operant conditioning, which incorporates the use of a marker signal (the click) to tell the animal precisely what he is doing right at that point in time. Behaviors that are marked by the click, even if you are reinforcing an emotional state, will be strengthened and are more likely to happen again. The handler clicks the desired behavior and then gives the dog a food treat or favorite toy.

The benefits of using the clicker are many: it is easy to carry, easy to use; it means the same thing all the time no matter what the circumstance (and no matter how nervous you might be). Even in the distracting excitement of a trial, the strength and meaning of the clicker remains constant. Learning is quicker simply because there is no emotional variability involved.

Let’s look at a common example of how this learning could be applied.

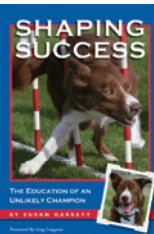
Dogs That Respond Aggressively When Watching Other Dogs Run

If you have a dog that cannot watch another dog run an agility course without getting overstimulated, then you will want to teach your dog to observe the running dog calmly and to give you automatic eye contact when this process begins. Once you have his attention, then you can ask your dog to perform a series of incompatible behaviors. This will keep him busy while he waits to enter the ring.



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To start this process, click and feed your dog at a high rate of reinforcement for simply being in the environment. You will want to work within your dog's tolerance level. It doesn't matter what body position your dog is in as long as he is tolerating the environment better than he has in the past. This type of reinforcement is known as the Differential Reinforcement of Low Intensity Behavior or DRL. Click and feed him at the lowest points of intensity of the reactive behavior. If you cannot tell where this is, watch your dog breathe. Click as he takes a breath and then feed. By marking the behavior at its lowest points, you will cause an overall decline in the intensity of the behavior. You will start to see small windows of calm behavior. The more you continue to click, the calmer your dog will become.

Then progress to clicking and feeding him for actually watching another dog move in the ring. As you continue this process, your dog will start to give you automatic eye contact when he sees the stimulus that produced the click/treat originally. When he begins to look at the running dog in the ring and gives you eye contact immediately after, you will want to switch your criteria to clicking about 98% of eye contact and 2% of watching dogs run in the ring. This behavior will become very automatic and noticeable.

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The result is that the problematic stimulus, in this example the running of the other dog, becomes the cue, in and of itself, to look at you, the handler. So the more chaotic the environment, the quicker your dog will give you eye contact. Not a bad quality for a highly competitive dog. As you continue to work this behavior, the more focused and relaxed your dog will become. Now, if you choose, you can insert your cues to perform the incompatible behaviors before you enter the ring.

Secrets of Success:

- Determine how close your dog has to be to the dog running the course before he reacts.
- Make a note of this distance.
- Back up a couple of feet. This will become your dog's threshold.
- Start clicking and feeding your dog from this distance. You will want your dog to be somewhat stimulated but not completely out of control. If your dog is constantly out of control, no matter what the distance, start clicking and feeding somewhere in the middle. Try to time your click as he takes a breath, but

even if your timing is off, windows of hesitation will still slowly open. (Clicker training is very forgiving of handler errors.) As this hesitation happens, it will allow you to time your clicks better. Now you can start testing to see where your threshold is and continue from there.

- Use a high rate of reinforcement when beginning and use a type of treat that your dog never gets unless he is doing this work. (You can play tug with your dog as a reward only if your dog will take the toy and drop it on cue.)
- Click your dog for looking at and hearing other dogs in the agility ring. This will produce automatic eye contact.
- Work speed and distance separately. For example, if you have a friend that could practice running her dog at a slower pace in the agility ring, then you could get closer to the ring and click and feed your dog for watching the other dog's movements. If you are at a real agility trial, click and feed your dog for watching the other dogs run, but in this case, remember to work at your dog's threshold. Adjust your distance accordingly.
- Wear gloves if your dog takes the treat forcefully. This behavior will start to disappear as your dog's tolerance level improves.
- Click and feed the dog for watching other dogs moving at a fast pace both on the agility field and off. Capture the behavior with a click as often as you can.
- As with any training method, if you do not see improvement, stop and re-evaluate your training plan. Consult with a clicker trainer in your area.

In my reactive dog classes, we work the agility obstacles usually by the third week. Handlers are quiet and dogs are concentrating. Not only are we teaching the dogs to perform the obstacles



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accurately, but as we are working one dog at a time, the handlers on the sidelines are clicking and treating their dogs for watching and listening to the potential triggers that previously might have sparked their dogs' aggressive episodes in the past. The result: automatic eye contact followed by the performance of previously learned cued behaviors. Now, instead of merely reacting to the challenging stimuli in the surrounding environment, these dogs have become thinking beings. 

Author's note: If you are going to bring your clicker to the agility trial, be sure to click at a distance away from the ring. Be respectful of the trial rules and the people around you.

Emma Parsons has been helping owners and their dogs deal with aggression and reactivity issues through the methodology of clicker training for the past nine years. She is the Canine Behavior Consultant for the VCA Rotherwood Animal Clinic in Newton, Massachusetts and is also the Training Director for Karen Pryor's Clicker Training in Waltham, Massachusetts. Emma wrote the highly regarded book, Click to Calm: Healing the Aggressive Dog (available from www.cleanrun.com) and teaches Reactive Dog Classes at Masterpeace Dog Training in Franklin, Massachusetts. Contact Emma at CreativK9@aol.com.

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