

PETS

Making the most of your relationship WITH YOUR PET

By Anderson Animal Shelter

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The vast majority of pet owners are familiar with the quality of care to be provided to an animal's physical well being: a high quality diet, regular vet visits, routine vaccinations and exercise, as well as preventative care. Frequently, the psychological and emotional well-being of our furry friends are overlooked.

Based on advances in the field of animal behavior sciences, Anderson Animal Shelter has begun to incorporate a holistic approach to animal behavior and enrichment. "All of our methods are based around positive reinforcement," said Animal Enrichment and Behavior Manager, Steve Frost. "Force and punishment based training is outdated, and ineffective. The techniques we use work because the dogs want to work, they have fun doing so, and it's fun for the handler as well."

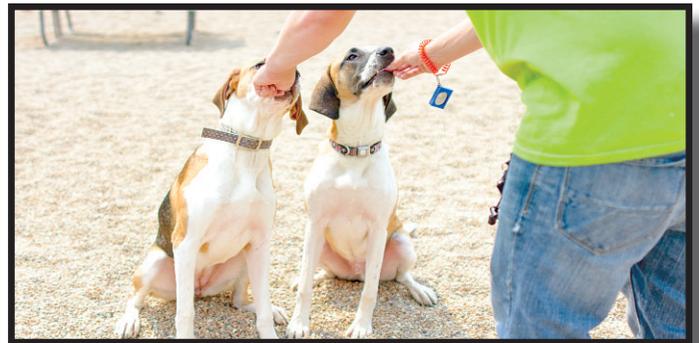
Anderson utilizes clicker training as a form of event marker operant conditioning, incorporating elements of classical conditioning to shape emotional responses to stimuli through positive reinforcement. The core concept is that a positive association is built between the sound of the clicker, and the immediate promise of a high-value reward. Once this connection is made, the click can then be used to precisely "capture" a desired behavior exactly as it happens, with a reward coming immediately thereafter and always. The captured behavior then increases in frequency until it reliably occurs, whereupon a cue can be put on it, such as "sit", "down" or "shake". These are the same fundamental techniques used across the nation in virtually all prestigious zoological and aquatic institutions to train wild animals in a non-contact and force-free manner.

Frost added further comment, "Instead of punishing a dog for what they did wrong, we think creatively and reward them for what they did right. If a dog is jumping up and they know how to sit, I'm going to ask them to sit for me and reward them accordingly, instead of punishing them for jumping. When the dog is sitting, he's not jumping on me. I'm happy, and the dog's happy knowing he has the capacity to do something simple to get a reward. Over time, the handler becomes associated with this positivity and the dogs simply couldn't be happier to work. It seems counterintuitive, but the same is true for reactive dogs. If a dog is barking aggressively and trying to get at another dog while on a leash walk, we want to revert back to classical conditioning and click/treat that dog. Over time, the dog will associate the other dog with a positive emotional response instead of a frenzied, negative one. Our society predisposes us to think we need to punish a dog to be in control, and that we need to be 'alpha'. That simply is not true!"

Anderson Animal Shelter also utilizes clicker training to make a difference in

the lives of felines. Many of the cats at Anderson have arrived fearful and stressed. Through clicker training, they make a positive association with human contact, handling and interaction.

"Having a protocol to mitigate stress and help motivate interaction has incredible potential for the cats in Anderson's care," said Brenda Borden, a long term feline socialization volunteer. "Pinpointing a trigger like cage approach or outreached hands that individual cats find fearful is the first step. Nemo, a 5 year old Maine Coon mix, is a new enrollee that is protective of his personal space. He's still



young with energy that needs to be displaced. We play first before training so we're taking that pent-up energy away. Then he's able to focus on clicker training for his particular trigger, which is touch."

So what simple steps can a pet owner do to better the pet and guardian relationship? "Focus on what your animal does right, and build upon that," said Frost. "Think creatively how you can utilize desirable behaviors and rewards and substitute them for undesirable ones and punishment. Take just a little bit of time out of your day to work with your pet, and have fun doing so! If you encounter any serious behavioral problems, contact a professional trainer who utilizes positive reinforcement and a 'do no harm' philosophy, or stop by the Shelter and we can happily provide you with resources and point you in the right direction."



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