

More on Targeting For Fear issues

Here is a part of an article (from the clickersolutions web site) by Karen Pryor on how she used the clicker to overcome fear of children in a flat coated retriever:

"We did have an 'aggression case' we worked on repeatedly, on this trip; but I didn't think of it in those terms! An 18 month old flat coated retriever was afraid of children (for reason, she'd been threatened by some children with sticks in her neighborhood.) She barked at any children, and being a big black scared dog, she looked pretty threatening herself. I worked with her at each seminar, since she belonged to my hosts, Morten and Cecelia, and was traveling with us (and the dog was 100% clicker trained.)

First, using my fist as a target Cecelia clicked her to my fist with me sitting and then standing. (On stage. It's all videotaped.) Then we repeated that using my 10 yr. old granddaughter Gwen's fist as the target. (Gwen was my companion and roommate on the whole trip, what joy! We had a great time.) Well, the first touch to Gwen's fist was VERY hard for the dog, she begged Cecelia not to send her, she pleaded with me to touch my fist instead (so I put my fist right next to Gwen's, poor dog, she was scared!) Then she got braver, and then after numerous clicked sendouts and touches confident enough to express her relief by giving Gwen a big kiss on the face. (Gwen, of course, is a good budding clicker trainer herself and has a giant bounding Lab and a non-stop Jack Russell at home, so she is dog-wise and loves them all.)

In the third seminar a few days later we had Gwen herself click the dog through repeated sits and downs. An hour or two after that we did the fist targeting again, with Turid's eight-year-old granddaughter Irina in the chair, a younger, wigglier, and thus more frightening child.

The dog stood up on its toes and barked at Irina when she walked on stage. Good! This child is a Scary Looking Kid, just what we need for this shaping session! Turid stood behind her darling child, watching like a hawk, of course. Cecelia, beaming and relaxed, sent her dog to the target, Irina's fist. I was clicking and treating the child, with candies, for holding her fist out to be touched, because she was scared of the dog, too,

now.

When the dog had been sent out to the child's fist several times the dog then smooched that little girl too, a big lick right across the mouth, and the child laughed. Click and jackpot--extra treats--for dog and for child too. Great time to end the session.

Cecelia told me that afterwards, while I was still lecturing away, the child and the dog were on the floor together outside the auditorium, the dog belly up for child to scratch her chest, and the child scratching vigorously with both hands. ("Oh you're NOT a monster, you're just a nice little person/a nice big dog.") I would hate to try to do this kind of stuff--withOUT the clicker. Let's look at the logistics. It took me and Cecelia about a thirty-second exchange of plans before each clicker session, and four actual clicker sessions of about five to ten minutes each (on stage, on video, 200 people and many dogs present, about three days between sessions) to convey to the dog the information we needed to tell it: "Kids are great. You met some bad kids? Forget it, here's some fun things you can do with kids." How long would that take with gradual exposure, desensitization, and counter-conditioning (feed the dog in the presence of children)...oh, please." copyright 2000 Karen Pryor

Here is what I would do: First, I'd teach your dog to touch a Post-It-Note when I'm holding it and then I'd stick it on furniture and c/t her for touching it there. If the dog is doing that reliably then teach the dog a hand signal (your hand pointing at the target). The next step is to stick the Post-It-Note to another persons hand. Cue the dog to touch the target when this person is sitting then when she is standing and finally when she is standing up. Always c/t when the dog touches the target. When you are doing that you are using two strategies for overcoming fear:

1) Clicker trainer and riding instructor Alexandra Kurland says: "We have found that when you ask horses to interact with their environment and touch the things [in your case people] they are afraid of, when you click and reinforce them for it, the horses will lose their fear." [This works for dogs as well.]

2) Karen Pryor says: "Cues followed by behaviors, followed by clicks and treats are very reinforcing and can be used to overcome fear."