

Clicker Mad

Karen Pryor took tools and insights refined with dolphins and applied them to dogs, and training has never been the same... thank goodness!

By Amy Sutherland

In 1974, Karen Pryor zipped off her wet suit and hung up her dolphin-training whistle—for good, she thought. She left Hawaii and eventually moved to New York City with her teenage daughter, where she set up shop as a freelance writer. Pryor already had two books under her belt, and now embarked on her third: an easy-to-read manual on using the science of operant conditioning in everyday life, whether it be with pet Poodles or grouchy bus drivers. She hoped, as she says, that the book would also stop parents from yelling at their kids. Taking a line from Pryor's manuscript, her editor dubbed the book *Don't Shoot the Dog*. Pryor hated the title.

The slim volume was published in 1984. It didn't stop people from screaming at their kids as Pryor had hoped. It was, however, embraced by dog trainers, and in short order, Pryor was invited to speak at their gatherings. She accepted nervously—she knew dolphins far better than she knew dogs. “I was completely surprised,” Pryor says. “It was only because of the title that I had objected to.”

Twenty-some years later, Pryor's book

is still in print. The author has become a well-known training authority, and clicker training, the method her book inspired and she fostered, has made noticeable inroads. Exactly how many people are using clicker training is unclear. Estimates vary from 10 to 50 percent of professional dog trainers. The training method certainly has a very real presence on the web: 150 chat lists exist on Yahoo alone. In the past year, visits to Pryor's website, clickertraining.com, have increased 72 percent. Hits have come from around the globe, including Kenya, China, even Iran.

Not only has clicker training grown exponentially in the past dozen years, but its emphasis on using positive reinforcement has turned dog training on its head. “It's night and day now,” says Jean Donaldson, director of the San Francisco SPCA's Academy of Dog Trainers and author of *The Culture Clash*.

Before clicker training, the Koehler method, relying on correction and punishment, was the overwhelmingly predominant style. The only choice, Donaldson says, was what kind of collar to use—pinch or prong. Traditional dog training is all about telling a dog he's made a mis-

take by jerking his leash or pinching his ear. Clicker training took a glass-half-full approach.

“We never taught the dog what to do,” says Corally Burmaster, a longtime trainer who runs the Clicker Training Center in Leesburg, Virginia. “We taught them what *not* to do. The emphasis now is finding positive ways to communicate to our dogs what we want them to do. The emphasis has shifted dramatically.”

Pryor, in large part, is responsible for this shift. Though not the first to use positive reinforcement with dogs, she was the first to explain how it could be used effectively with them, not to mention with other species. Though dog trainers have worked out the finer points of clicker training, Pryor provided the philosophical underpinnings and scientific ideas behind it. As Ken Ramirez, head of training at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, puts it, “Her book was a guiding light.” Leave it to a dolphin trainer to revolutionize the world of dog training.

This morning in Newport, Rhode Island, Pryor's influence can be seen and heard. Nearly 400 trainers, mostly women in fleece pullovers with clickers dangling

Karen Pryor
and Twitchet



Photograph by Peter Urban

from their necks like lockets, have flocked to a seaside hotel for a weekend of seminars put on by Karen Pryor Clicker Training. Their vans and wagons, with bumper stickers that read “I Click with My Dog,” cram the parking lot. They wander the hotel’s halls with Border Collies and Australian Shepherds by their side. The dogs can’t resist a bark or two at the sight of Panda, a clicker-trained seeing-eye horse, who parts the crowd like a visiting monarch wherever she goes. A slightly high, tinny sound, like people snapping their fingers, echoes through the hotel. This crisp beat, a percussive rendition of the word “yes,” has an uncanny cheeriness to it.

A small army, about 100 strong, settles into rows of padded banquet seats to listen to Pryor talk about cleaning up cues. While a Whippet gnaws loudly on a rawhide in the aisle, Pryor describes the various ways we humans, with all our fidgeting, give dogs—who take body language literally—inadvertent cues. When you give a hand cue for “sit,” she says, you may unconsciously cock your head or throw out a hip. Maybe you toss back your hair. To the canine mind, these are all important signals. “Which one is the dog following?” Pryor says. “God only knows.”

side for a reward of fish.

This was the crucial piece of the puzzle for dog trainers who had tried to use positive reinforcement, such as Burmaster. “The ability to communicate precisely what you wanted, that was the piece for me that was missing,” Burmaster says.

In her early talks to dog trainers, Pryor used her dolphin whistle to demonstrate how to use a bridge. Dog trainers got the idea, but didn’t go for the whistle. In 1991, Pryor teamed up with Gary Wilkes, then a shelter manager and now a well-known clicker trainer, to give talks. Wilkes proposed using a plastic noisemaker he’d found in a novelty store rather than a whistle. The twosome handed them out at a presentation, and clicker training was essentially born.

Burmaster, who had given up training because, as she says, “she got tired of jerking her dogs around,” attended a Pryor–Wilkes seminar that same year. She went home and in short order taught her Airedale to hold a dumbbell and her quarter horse to quit whirling when it was released into the field. She returned to training and started the *Clicker Journal*. Likewise, Donaldson, after attending a seminar in 1992, went, as she says, “clicker mad.” “It blew my mind,” she says. “I went

The assembled are here as much to learn about cues as they are to sit at the feet of their inspirational leader. If they expected someone with buckets of charisma, à la Cesar Millan, they might be disappointed. Pryor has an unassuming presence, except for a smile so warm it’s almost beatific. At 74, she’s slender and keeps her hair a soft shade of strawberry blond. She has an easy, down-to-earth manner and isn’t afraid to make mistakes when working a dog in front of an audience. She is also not one for mystique. If anything, Pryor is the anti-whisperer—she’s taken the mystery out of dog training, showing that you don’t have to be a natural or have a special aura. You just need a bit of science, a bit of operant conditioning. “It’s not magic,” Pryor says. “It’s just easy. Anyone with an IQ can do it.”

At its core, operant conditioning is deceptively simple: Behavior is shaped by its consequences. At Harvard University, B.F. Skinner, the father of operant conditioning, demonstrated this through countless experiments with pigeons. He also found that positive reinforcement was far more effective than punishment at soliciting desired behaviors. As Pryor points out, operant conditioning isn’t hard to understand but is devilishly hard to apply,

if only because it is so counterintuitive to humans, who are quick to use punishment as a teaching tool.

Pryor had her initial go at applying operant conditioning when her first husband drafted her to train the dolphins at his new marine facility, Sea Life Park in Hawaii. Pryor was far more interested in the park’s reef fish, but she was the only one handy with any training experience. She had worked with her Weimaraner, Gus, and then her Welsh ponies. However, nothing she had done with her dog or ponies really applied to the dolphins, especially given that she was on land and they were in a big tank of saltwater. She could not use reins or a leash. If the dolphins didn’t want to work, they just swam off.

“A big ‘Aha!’ for me was discovering operant conditioning,” she says. Like other early dolphin trainers, she realized that a wholly new approach was needed and found it in operant conditioning. The science not only made stunningly good sense to Pryor, but she quickly had proof of its effectiveness as she taught the wild-caught dolphins to flip on command. A crucial tool was the whistle, which, in operant-conditioning talk, is a bridge. The whistle tells the dolphin exactly when it has done the desired behavior and to come pool-



home and trained my dog for hours.”

In 1993, Pryor started Sunshine Books, which publishes various clicker training manuals, and that enterprise grew into her larger company, Karen Pryor Clicker Training. In 1998, she moved from Washington state to the Boston area to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren. She lives on the first floor of a two-family house that borders a golf course in the western suburb of Watertown. She shares her digs with

Twitchet, her 15-year-old Border Terrier, and Misha, an eight-year-old German harlequin Poodle. Both are clicker trained.

Though Pryor is a celebrity in the dog-training world, that is just one facet of her very busy, productive life. Her 1963 book on breast-feeding is still in print and has sold over two million copies. She’s authored many scientific papers. She has worked with a large variety of species, and is a regular consultant to zoos, which explains why, during her Newport talk, she showed video of a warthog and a lion who had been clicker-trained. She has joined forces with a scientist, a gymnastics coach and a dance teacher to see how clicker training can be used to teach humans. And she is writing a new book, *Reaching the Animal Mind*, due out from Scribner’s in 2008. A philosophical approach knits all this varied work together, she says. Her central thrust is to “reduce gratuitous cruelty in the world.”

To that end, she’s made some headway in the pet dog world. Though there’s far more work to be done, she’s set the ball rolling. Clicker training “has a life of its own now,” she says. “I can almost kick back now and let it take its own course.”

clickertraining.com