

# 101 things you can do with a Target stick!

## Why Use a Target Stick?

When I recommend using a target stick to my performance students, they will often ask “Why?” After all, lure-reward training has worked pretty well for them so far and who wants to have to fade a target stick!

My answer is easy: training with a target stick creates better understanding for the dog with fewer steps. In short, it's effective *and* efficient.

I believe it is more difficult to fade hand cues than to fade the target stick because our hands are always present. The dog that is taught using hand cues will tend to look at hands rather than listen to verbal cues for information.

As handlers, we become so patterned to provide hand cues that even when we decide it is time to fade the hand cues and place behaviors on verbal cues, our bodies don't always cooperate. Many handlers who have placed behaviors on verbal cues often don't even realize when they fall back into using their hands to “help” the dog.

## Mechanics of using the Target Stick:

Hold both the target stick and your clicker in one hand, placing the clicker on top of the stick. This leaves your other hand free to reward. Some rules to keep in mind:

1. Your click should not overshadow any indication of reward delivery, including reaching for the treat, keeping your hand in bait bag or pocket, hovering your hand over bait bag or pocket, or moving the reward toward the dog.
2. Your click should occur *as* the dog touches or follows the target, not after. It's better to click early or to not click at all than to click late.
3. If you click, you must treat. Keep your promise to your dog. A click means “you did it right and a reward is imminent.”
4. Immediately upon clicking, remove the target as a visual. Place it behind your back or up over your shoulder. Present it again only when the dog is finished eating and ready.

## Getting Started

For the target stick to be an effective training tool, you need to train, and maintain, not only touching the stick, but following it as well. Reward both behaviors regularly. You can teach the dog to touch with his nose or his paw. I use a different target stick for each (ball for nose, flat spatula for paw). The exercises below refer to nose touches. You would use a similar process for paw touches.

**Exercise 1:** Shape the dog to touch the ball end of the target stick. To do this you will mark and reward (C/T) any interest or movement toward the ball end of the stick. Gradually increase your criteria to clicking only touches with the nose to the ball.

**Exercise 2:** Once the dog is driving to the target when it is presented, begin to have the dog work a little harder to get to it. Place the target a little high so that he has to jump or come off his front feet to get to it. Place the target so the dog needs to go through your legs or under an obstacle to get to it. Make sure to alternate holding the target stick in your left and right hands and at various locations away from your body.

**Exercise 3:** Repeat exercise 2; but this time, after several repetitions of C/T for the dog touching the target, draw the target a little away from the dog as he moves to touch it. When he works to get to it, but before he actually touches it, C/T.

### **Troubleshooting:**

**If your dog is touching the stick rather than the ball** end of the stick, you have a couple of options. Both can work and it depends on your dog as to the best option.

1. Maintain the presence of the target but don't click until the dog touches the ball end.
2. Remove the target and present again, but in a way that the ball is easier for your dog to get to than the stick. (Hold the stick with the ball pointing down so the dog can't reach the stick part.)

**If your dog mouths or bites the target** stick, click sooner, while the dog is still approaching it. This earlier click marks the desired behavior (moving toward the target) but interrupts the behavior before the dog has a chance to put his mouth on the target. Gradually change the timing of your click until the dog is just touching and not mouthing.

**If your dog is ignoring the target completely**, you can prompt a glance toward it by adding a little movement of the target to the side of the dog. C/T the slightest interest or glance. As a last resort, you could use a food lure, such as peanut butter or Easy Cheese on the ball, to engage the dog with the target. Discontinue the use of the food as a lure after two to three repetitions and C/T offered movements your dog makes toward the clean target.

**If your dog does not follow the target while you are moving it away from your dog**, take a step backwards in your training and build up a stronger reinforcement history for just touching the target. Then work toward having the dog move a short distance toward it, just 6 to 12 inches, before attempting to move the target again. You can also move away from your dog with the stick rather than just move the stick while you are stationary. This will often draw the dog forward, giving you an opportunity to click movement toward the moving target stick.

### **Transferring the Targeting Behavior to a Cued Behavior**

You don't need to name the action of touching the target because the presence of the target is the cue for the dog to touch or follow it. When you have created a new behavior using the target stick, you then add a cue for that new behavior.

For example: I can use the target stick to teach a spin by having the dog follow the target in a circle. Before adding a verbal cue for the spin, I make sure I have included in the behavior each of the components or criteria that will become the meaning for the new cue. Do I want it fast? Do I want it tight? Do I want the dog to start and end in a particular position or location? Once the spin behavior is meeting my criteria, I will preface the appearance of the target stick with my new cue word. After several successful C/T'd repetitions, the dog will start to anticipate the appearance of the target stick when he hears my verbal cue and begin to respond before I move the target stick in a circle in front of his nose to create the spin.

Once the dog is responding to the verbal cue prior to the appearance of the target stick, I remove the target as a training aid. I can now elicit the spin behavior from the dog through the verbal cue alone.

### 101 Things you can Train with a Target Stick

Sit in front	Crawl forward	Dance in a circle	Figure 8 thru legs
Sit in heel	Crawl thru legs	High back to back	Walking weave
Down	Play dead	High back to chest	Face away in front
Come	Rollover	Jump over dog	Face away in heel
Walk on Loose Leash	Drive forward	Get on an exercise ball	Face away in right
Heel forward on Right	Go to a spot	Get on high surface	Face away behind
Heel forward on Left	Go to a mat/bed	Go out straight	Face away side pass rt
Heel backward right	Say yes	Jump thru hoop	Face away side pass lft
Heel backward left	Say no	Scoot back	Walking weave L to R
Back up in front	Look there	Ride a skate board	Walk back weave
Right paw lift (front)	Look here	Climb stairs	Fig 8 weave legs
Left paw lift (front)	Look up	Climb a ladder	Left about U
High five	Look down	Upstairs backward	180 change direction
High ten	Stand	Weave thru objects	Head in collar/harness
Wave left paw	Stand still	Dig	Say your prayers
Wave right paw	Duration Station	Touch an object	Pray harder!
Limp right paw	Circle object CW	Touch a person	Turn on light
Left paw lift (rear)	Circle object CCW	Touch another dog	Turn off light
Right paw lift (rear)	Circle handler CW	Indicate an object	Paws on shoulder
Cross paws	Circle handler CCW	Turn/back thru legs	Close the CD drawer
Go over	Smell the roses	Feet up	Close the cabinet
Go under	Spin CCW	Feet off	Close the door
Go through	Spin CW	Walk high	Jump up
Go around	Take a bow	Walk behind	Read a book
Get into	Curl a paw under	Eye contact/attention	Shift onto hip in down
Sit Pretty			