HEAD START:
CAT CLICKER TRAINING

Agenda for Today!

- Introductions
- Training cats - How and Why
- Positive Reinforcement/Training Methods
- Let's Practice
- What's Next?

Why Would We Need To Train Cats?

- Mental enrichment

- Confidence-building

- Build relationships

- Modify undesired behaviors

- Increase appeal to adopters

Can Cats Even Be Trained?

- Yes!

- All animals are learning all the time

- All animals follow the same principles of learning

- Cats often have been thought to be "untrainable" because more traditional forms of animal training cause flight/avoidance behaviors in cats faster than in some other species

- Therefore, our methods matter . . .

How Do We Train a Cat?

- Using positive reinforcement based methods
- Reward behaviors we like with something the animal likes
- Behaviors that are reinforced become stronger

Positive Reinforcement Training vs Aversive Training

Positive Reinforcement Training

- Rewards good behavior
- Builds bond with your animal
- Creates enthusiastic, confident learners
- Clear feedback for animal to understand
- Anyone can train

Punishment Based Training

- Suppresses "bad" behavior
- Creates emotional fallout such as fear and avoidance
- Results in negative associations with handler, environment
- Can result in more problematic behaviors
- Must be consistent and perfectly timed - trainer/aversive must be present
- Trains out natural behavior and communication

What is this clicker for?

- When using positive reinforcement, need a way to immediately indicate when the cat is "right."

- Clicker acts as a novel "reward marker" or "bridge" which marks the behavior we are looking for.

- Cat will then receive a primary reinforcer (food, play).

- Behaviors that were clicked become more likely to happen.

- If you click, you must reward!

- Advantages: novel sound is more salient, sounds the same no matter who is training, more precise timing

How does the cat know if she is wrong?

- ☐ Absence of reinforcement provides enough information
- ☐ No need for "No Reward Markers" such as "No!", "AACH!", etc.
  - ☐ Don't provide any additional information
  - ☐ Too easily become punishers, resulting in same fallout as other aversives (over-arousal, fear, etc.)
  - ☐ Changes the trainer's mindset – focus instead on looking for the "yes"

Steps to Teaching a Behavior

- Get the behavior! Mark/reward.

- Add a cue
  - CUE: A stimulus that elicits a behavior. Cues may be verbal, physical (i.e., a hand signal), or environmental (i.e., cat may go wait in a specific location when food bowls come out at meal time).
  - Cues vs. Commands
    - Cue = information that reinforcement is available for a behavior.
    - Command = implied threat, "do this or else"

- Generalize

Capturing

- Marking/rewarding when the animal offers the behavior naturally.

- As behavior is reinforced, will be offered more often, then able to put on cue.

- Good method for behaviors that animals are likely to do on their own (sit, eye contact)

Shaping

- Building new behavior by selectively reinforcing variations in existing behavior.
  - "Successive approximations"
  - Steps in the right direction toward ultimate goal behavior
- Empowers the learner to interact with environment and earn reinforcement. Choices matter!
- Good way to build more complex behaviors.
- Does require good observation and timing.

Shaping Example

- Carrier 1
- https://youtu.be/MvVRvpcJItk

- Carrier 2
- https://youtu.be/_XuSLT1S1hw

- Carrier w/lid
- https://youtu.be/LIXASK4z6KE

- Final result
- https://youtu.be/kQ_Rn1T2mRw

Targeting

- Animal is taught to touch something with a part of his body.
- Examples of targets: person's hand, target stick, platform, mat.
- Can be used to train more complicated behaviors.
- Good for moving animals, husbandry behaviors

Luring

- Using food to guide the cat through a behavior. For example, a food lure can be used to guide a cat from a sit into a down.

- Trainers must take care to fade the lure early or food becomes part of the cue.

What Does a Session Look Like?

- ☐ Cat will work in whatever location they are at
- ☐ Gather tools
  - ☐ Clicker
  - ☐ Treats
  - ☐ Target stick
- ☐ Work in very short intervals
  - ☐ Can build multiple training sessions into a visit with the cat, but give breaks in between
  - ☐ Actual working sessions about 1-2 minutes in length

Reward Delivery

- May depend on type of food reward being used – soft versus solid treat
  - For soft food, tongue depressors or syringes can be used for cat to lick
  - Solid treats can be tossed – especially for fearful cats!
- Use very small rewards – avoids stomach upset and keeps pace of session faster
- Avoid cross-contamination – use new tongue depressor, etc. for each cat you work with.

Finding Reinforcers – What if the cat won't eat?

- Experiment!
  - Canned food, baby food, spray cheese, cream cheese, cheese, meat, commercial treats
  - Make note for others if you find a cat's favorite reward
- Fearful animals often won't eat – offer the reward anyway.
  - May begin eating during the course of the session or afterwards
  - May be more likely to eat in subsequent sessions
  - Will at least perceive that reinforcers are being offered - this may be a process for some cats
- For some, consider reinforcers besides food
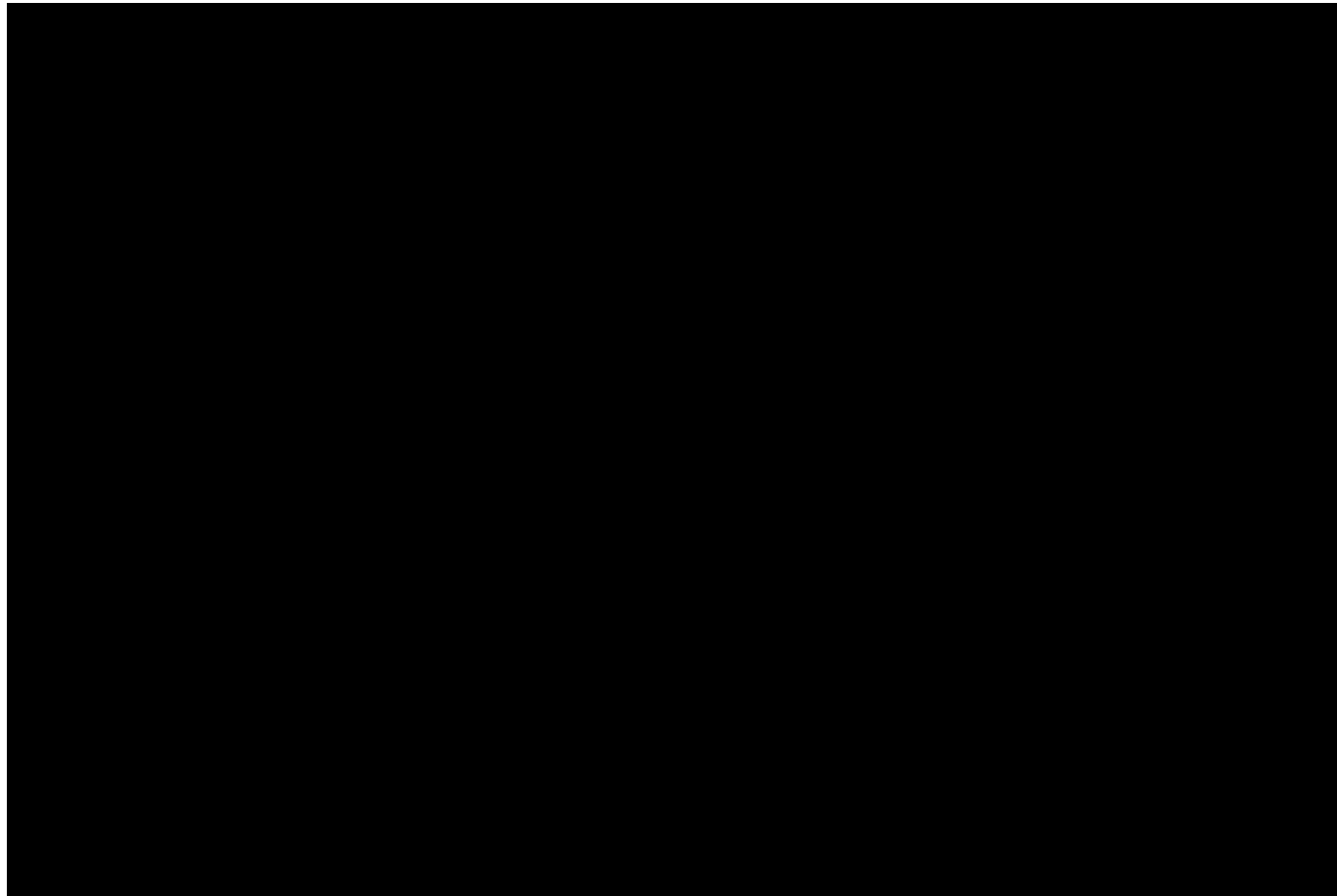 - Toy play, brushing, etc.

Core Skills for Active Cats

- Nose target
- Paw target
- Following target
- Tricks
  - High five
  - Wave
  - Obstacles (if available) – going under/over/through/on top of
  - Cute tricks you can think of!

Nose targeting with target stick
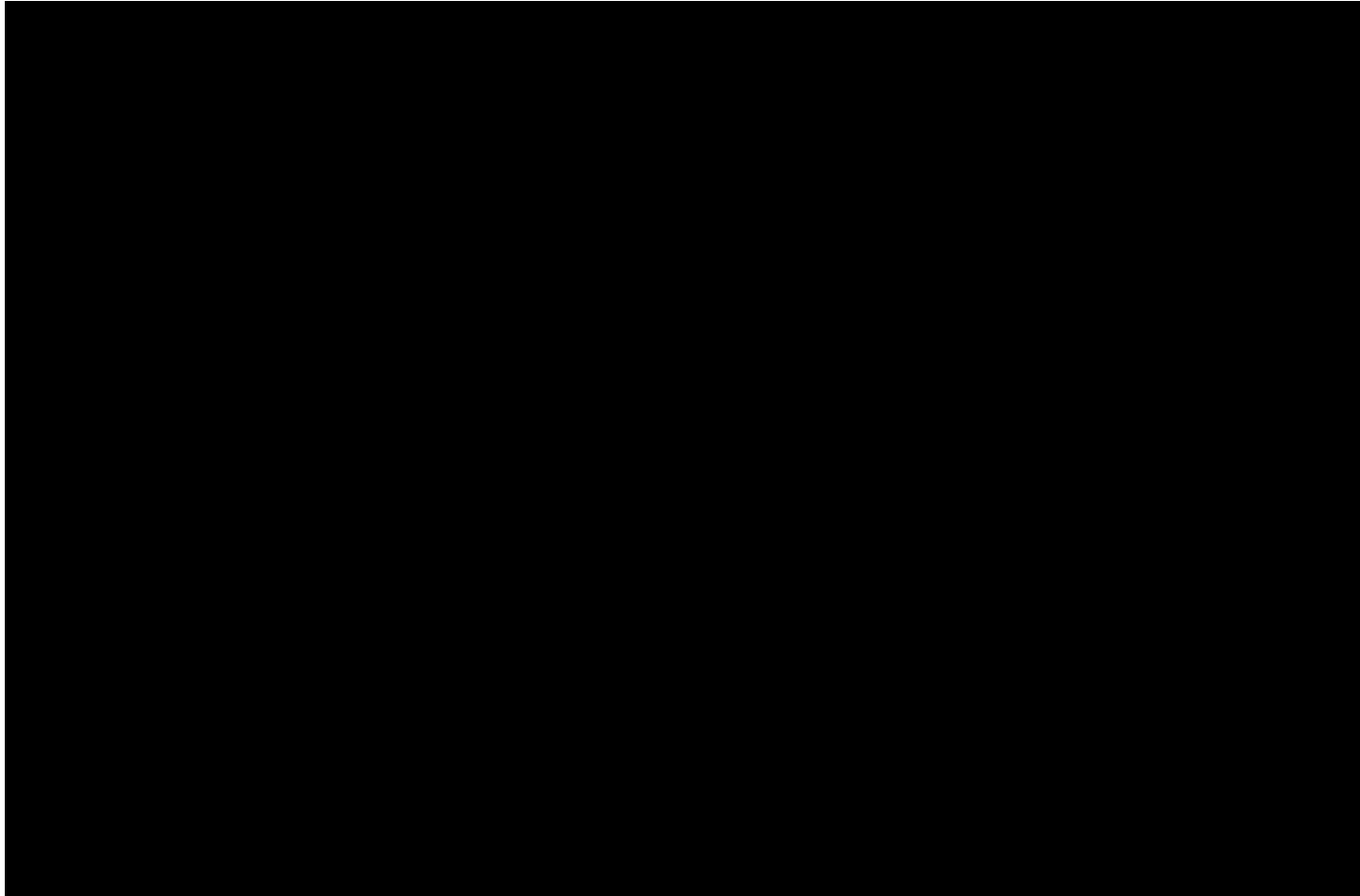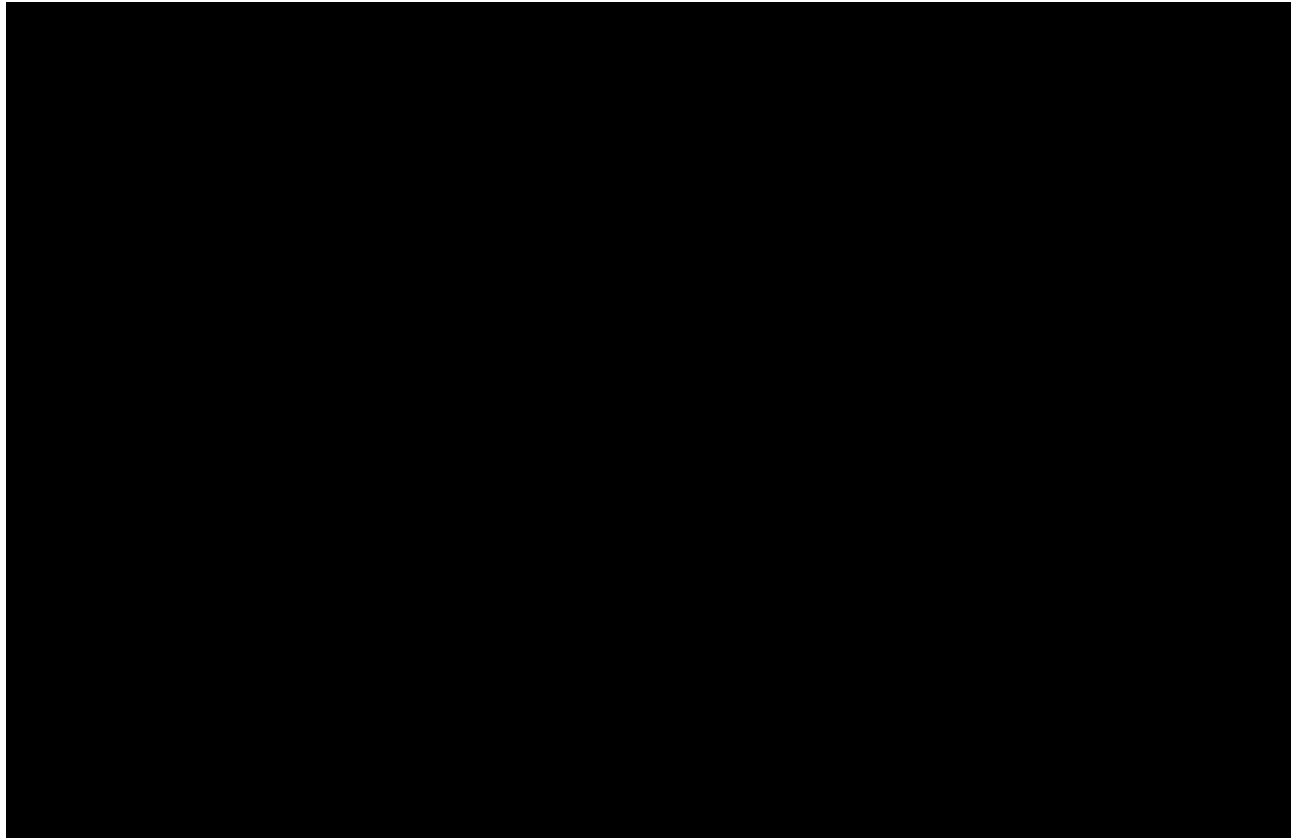
Nose targeting with hand/ finger

Core Skills for Shy Cats

- ☐ Clicking for calm behavior
- ☐ Encouraging forward movement
- ☐ Targeting
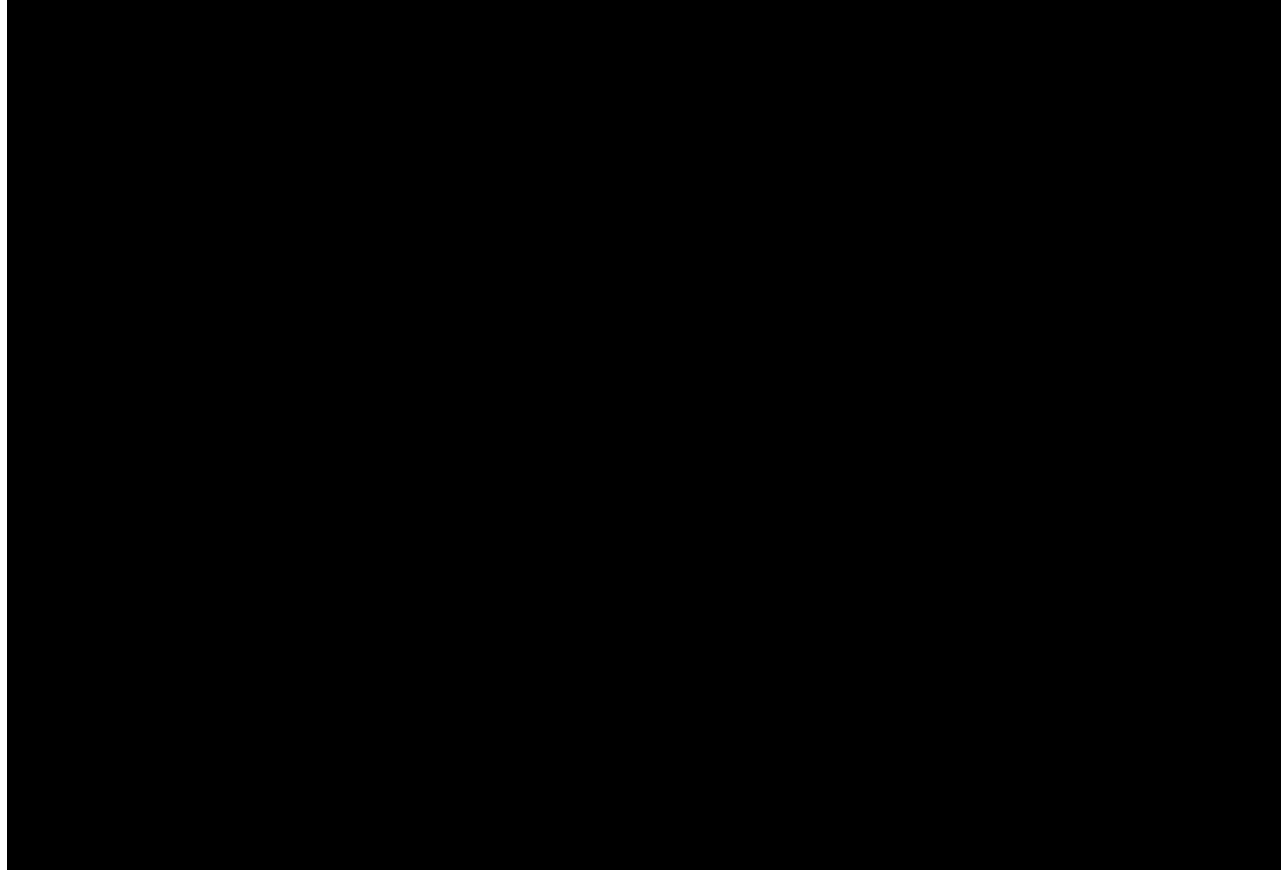
Clicking for calm behavior, capturing eye contact

Encouraging forward movement

Shaping Games

- "Show me what you've got" – clicking for any new behavior
- "101 things to do with a . . . " – clicking for engaging with a new object in the environment
- For shy cats, these games are confidence-building and empowering
- For active cats, these games are great boredom busters and mental stimulation

Shaping Games Example

- Brook and cube:

- https://youtu.be/wAJvZgq9fL8

Considerations for Training Cats

- Cats tend to have a very fast flight response – be mindful not to use sudden movements or strange objects the cat isn't familiar with.
  - Watch for signs of fear/avoidance
  - Of course, no aversives or corrections!
- Split behaviors into baby steps – cats often don't offer behaviors quite as fast or readily as the average dog
- Train in short intervals and take breaks in between
- Be patient

Process

- Binder and tools in comforting station
- Can utilize food/ treats from the cat kitchen
- List in binder indicates cats recommended for training
- Those cats will already have individual sheets in binder
- Can also choose cats, please create a new sheet for that cat
- Make sure you're documenting visit
- Must be appropriate comforting level: Blue Dot/ non Blue Dot
- All FOH cats open to head Start, regardless of housing
- Special food considerations
- Can really do no harm here!

Logging Sessions

- Note what reinforcers used/tried and cat's response

- What behaviors worked on

- Describe observable behaviors:
  - "Fluffy was crouched in rear of cage, trembling, and facing back corner."
  - Instead of:
  - "Fluffy was really scared."

- We'll eventually have cage identifiers for what cat has learned- this is a work in progress!

What's next

- Assignments will open early next week

- No set block of time for Head Start or cap on number of comforters that can sign up at one time

- As with Read To Calm, priority is for comforting. Circle back around for clicker work if someone is already visiting with cat.

Take a **5 minute** break and then we will come back and practice!

Wrap-Up

- Questions?
- Jess: jessv@hshv.org
- Angela: angela@harmonyk9.com
- E-mail group?
- Training resources will be available in the volunteer resource library
- On going training/ new sessions