Finding a Class

Uses:
✶ Finding a class that uses positive teaching methods

Okay, so you've started training your dog and you think that taking a class would be fun. It will take a little work on your part to make sure that the class you take meets your needs. There are many choices. You can take a basic dog manners course. You can take a class directed at passing the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test (see pages 169 and 195). Or you can take classes to get your dog an obedience, flyball, agility, or tracking title. Whichever you choose, classes should be fun for both you and your dog.

First, decide what you want to get from a class. Then begin your search to find an instructor and class that will fulfil your needs and fit you and your dog.

Unlike other training methods, clicker training is not about your winning, or becoming alpha or top dog. It's about you both winning. You win by having a well-mannered canine friend. Your dog wins by understanding what makes you happy and gets a reward. You are not your dog's boss; you are his guardian. You both gain a great deal from the training process. You learn to communicate and bond with your dog. Your dog learns that he can control the consequences of his actions.

If you bought this book and reading this page you probably interested in taking a clicker class. To locate a clicker trainer in your area see qualified clicker instructors (see page 185). If you are unable to find a clicker class in your area you can often still join a class and use your clicker. Simply get permission from the instructor to use a clicker in class. Don't make it a big deal, just click and treat as needed. You will, however, want to find a class that uses non-coercive methods (for both you and your dog). Not all classes are taught that way. Many classes advertise that they are gentle, humane, and use positive reinforcement. However, some of these instructors believe that you must use 'corrections' first and then follow with praise or a reward. This is not the way I believe dogs (or people) learn best. If you don't want to 'correct' your dog while he's trying to learn, I suggest you look for a class using the positive reinforcement part of operant conditioning. (See page 185)

If you have permission to click in a non-clicker class, it's important for the instructor to tell you what they will teach at the next class. This will allow you to introduce your dog to the new skill in a gradual, positive way. Use the class to practice and refine the skill in a distracting location. If your dog doesn't know the skill the class is working on, then work on a skill your dog knows. Train the new skill in small incremental steps at home.

To help you find a class, I have included forms (pages 134-137) for you to copy and fill out for each class you are interested in taking. The first one is for the phone interview you should conduct. The second one is for you to fill out while observing a class (before you sign up). Be sure you interview and observe the person that will actually be teaching your class.

Copy these pages and fill out one for each class you are interested in taking.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
~Robert Frost

Phone Interview Form

Class Name _____Phone_____
Start Date_____Time_____Cost_____

Your Questions	The Instructor's Answers
What are the qualifications of the person that will teach the class? See page 185 for information on qualifications of instructors.	
Do they require a choke, a check, or slip collar? These are for correcting a dog. They are used in correction-based training classes. Avoid these classes.	
What are their teaching philosophies/learning theories?	
Number of dogs in class? (Most clicker trainers find that beginning classes are best limited to eight dogs).	
Can you observe the class (without your dog)? They should allow you to observe.	
What books and videos do they recommend you read before the class? Read them and see if you agree with what they say.	
Do they have assistants? What are their qualifications? Will they be helping with the actual instructing?	
Are clickers allowed? Do they say yes, but then try to convince you don't need a clicker?	
Do they ask you what you want to get out of the class (socialization, an obedience title, or a specific solution to a problem)?	
Do they encourage the entire family to come and work with your dog? Dog training affects everyone in the family. A dog is smart enough to learn from everyone in his family.	

Class Observation Form

Class Name _____Phone_____
Start Date_____Time_____Cost_____

What to Look for at Class	Your Observations
Does the instructor tell the students to correct their dogs (using squirt bottles, leash pops, or loud commands)? Or do they show you how you can get the skill without corrections?	
Does the instructor encourage the students to use a variety of reinforcements (food, toys, or play)?	
Do the students ask questions? Are they answered?	
Are all the dogs wearing the same kind of collar to correct their behavior? (This shows that the instructor is not helping students find individual solutions.)	
Are all the students doing the same things simultaneously (drill)? Each dog and handler should be encouraged to learn at their own rate.	
Is the instructor correcting the people, or kindly showing them a positive way to succeed?	
Do the dogs seem happy or are they nervous (licking, yawning, barking)?	
Are the humans relaxed, smiling, and comfortable?	
Does the instructor see dogs as adversarial? Do they explain a dog's action as sneaky, deceitful, or stubborn?	
Does the instructor criticize other training methods, but doesn't explain why they don't work?	