

86 Things to Do with a Box

(101 Things to Do with a Box, the Thinking or Training Game)

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This training game is derived from a dolphin research project in which I and others participated, “The creative porpoise: training for novel **behavior**,” published in the *Journal of Experimental Analysis of Behavior* in 1969. It has become a favorite with dog trainers. It’s especially good for “crossover” dogs with a long history of **correction**-based training, since it encourages mental and physical flexibility and gives the dog courage to try something on its own.

Step one

Take an ordinary cardboard box, any size. Cut the sides down to about three inches, and put the box on the floor. Click the dog for looking at the box. Treat. If the dog goes near or past the box, even by accident, click. Next, after you click, toss the treat near or in the box. If the dog steps toward the box to get the treat, click the step and toss another treat. If he steps into the box, great, click again, even if he is eating his previous treats, and offer him another treat in your hand.

Sometimes you can cook up a lot of “box action” in a hurry, this way: Click for stepping toward or into the box. Alternately toss the treat in the box and hold the treat out in your hand so the dog has to come back to you. If the dog is reluctant to step into the box, and so doesn’t eat that treat, it doesn’t matter: he knows he got it. If treats accumulate in the box, fine. When he does step into the box, he’ll get a **jackpot**. If you decide to stop the session before that happens, fine. Pick up the treats in the box, and put them away for a later session. Remember, never treat without clicking first, and always click for a reason: for some action of the dog’s.

If you need more behavior to click, you can move yourself to different parts of the room so the box is between you and the dog, increasing the likelihood of steps in the direction of the box. Don’t call the dog, don’t pat the box, don’t chat, don’t encourage the dog, and don’t “help” him. All of that stuff may just make him more suspicious. Click foot movements toward the box, never mind from how far away, and then treat. If you get in five or six good clicks, for moving in the direction or near or past the box, and then the dog “loses interest” and goes away, fine. You can always play “box” again later. In between sessions, the reinforcements you did get in will do their work for you; each little session will make things livelier the next time.

You are, after all, teaching your dog new rules to a new game. If you have already trained your dog by conventional methods, the dog may be respecting the general rule, “Wait to be told what to do.” So the first rule of this new game, “Do something on your own, and I will click,” is a toughie. In that case, the box game is especially valuable, and the first tiny steps are especially exciting—although they would be invisible to an onlooker, and may right now seem invisible to you.

End the first session with a “click for nothing” and a jackpot consisting of either a handful of treats, or a free grab at the whole bowl. Hmm. That’ll get him thinking. The next time that cardboard box comes out, he will be alert to new possibilities. Clicks. Treats. Jackpots. “That cardboard box makes my person behave strangely, but on the whole, I like this new strangeness. Box? Something I can do, myself? With that box?” Those are new ideas, but they will come.

If your dog is very suspicious, you may need to do the first exercise over again once, or twice, or several times, until he “believes” something a human might phrase thus: “All that is going on here is that the click sound means my person gives me delicious food. And the box is not a trap, the box is a signal that click and treat time is here, if I can just find out how to make my person click.”

Step two

Whether these things occur in the same session or several sessions later, here are some behaviors to click. Click the dog for stepping in the box; for pushing the box, pawing the box, mouthing the box, smelling the box, dragging the box, picking up the box, thumping the box—in short, for anything the dog does with the box.

Remember to click WHILE the behavior is going on, not after the dog stops. As soon as you click, the dog will stop, of course, to get his treat. But because the click marked the behavior, the dog will do that behavior again, or some version of it, to try to get you to click again; so you do not lose the behavior by interrupting it with a click.

You may end up in a wild flurry of box-related behavior. GREAT! Your dog is already learning to problem-solve in a creative way. If you get swamped, and can't decide which thing to click, just jackpot and end the session. Now YOU have something to think about between sessions.

You may on the other hand get a more methodical, slow, careful testing by the dog: the dog carefully repeats just what was clicked before. One paw in the box, say. Fine: but right away YOU need to become flexible about what you click, or you will end up as a matched pair of behavioral bookends. Paw, click. Paw, click. Paw, click. That is not the way to win this game.

So, when the dog begins to offer the behavior the same way, repeatedly, withhold your click. He puts the paw out, you wait. Your behavior has changed; the dog's behavior will change too. The dog might keep the paw there longer; fine, that's something new to click. He might pull it out; you could click that, once or twice. He might put the other paw in, too...fine, click that. Now he may try something new.

And? Where do we go from here? Well, once your dog has discovered that messing around with the box is apparently the point of this game, you will have enough behavior to select from, so that you can now begin to click only for certain behaviors, behaviors that aim toward a plan. It's as if you have a whole box of Scrabble letters, and you are going to start selecting letters that spell a word. This process is part of "shaping."

Step three

Variations and final products: What could you shape, from cardboard box behaviors?

Get in the box and stay there

Initial behavior: Dog puts paw in box. Click, toss treats. Then don't click, just wait and see. Maybe you'll get two paws in box. Click. Now get four paws in box. Get dog in box. Options: Sitting or lying in box; staying in box until clicked; staying in box until called, then clicked for coming.

Uses: Put the dog to bed. Put the dog in its crate. Let children amuse themselves and make friends with the dog by clicking the dog for hopping into a box and out again (works with cats, too). One third-grade teacher takes her Papillion to school on special events days, in a picnic basket. When the basket is opened, the dog hops out, plays with the children, and then hops back in again.

Behavior: Carry the box

Initial behavior: Dog grabs the edge of the box in its teeth and lifts it off the floor.

Uses: Millions. Carry a box. Carry a basket. Put things away: magazines back on the pile. Toys in the toy box. A dog that has learned the generalized or generic rule, "Lifting things in my mouth is reinforceable," can learn many additional skills.

Behavior: Tip the box over onto yourself

I don't know what good this is, but it's not hard to get: it crops up often in the "101 things to do with a box" game. If the dog paws the near edge of the box hard enough, it will flip.

My Border terrier, Skookum, discovered that he could tip the living-room wastebasket (wicker, bowl-shaped, empty) over on himself, so that he was hidden inside it. Then he scooted around in there, making the wastebasket move mysteriously across the floor. It was without a doubt the funniest thing any of our dinner guests had ever seen a dog do. Since terriers love being laughed with (but never at), clicks and treats were not necessary to maintain the behavior once he had discovered it—and he learned to wait until he was invited to do it, usually when we had company.

Karen Pryor author of 86 things to do with a box. A pioneer in ethology and behavior and the leading spokesperson for clicker training, Karen is a scientist with an international reputation in two fields: marine mammal biology and behavioral psychology. Through her work with dolphins in the 1960s, she developed modern, force-free animal training methods. Karen is the author of many scientific papers and monographs and seven books.