

It's a Clicker Miracle!

By Howard Weinstein - **Day-One Dog Training**

...So, one day, one of our 14-year old Corgis—Callie—suddenly started being afraid to go down stairs. We figured her hesitation was related to pain from her spinal arthritis. At the same time, she was becoming easily spooked when hands came near her face—whether to pet her or hook her leash to her collar.

Eventually, we realized her problem with steps wasn't arthritis-related (since the medication Rimadyl provided good pain relief). It was her failing vision: she literally couldn't *see* things right in front of her. No wonder she didn't want to bound downstairs the way she used to, and hands near her face were scary blurs!

The stairs in question led down from our main floor to our ground-level basement, where we'd go outside through the garage. It's a flight of stairs with two landings, rather than a long and frightening straight staircase. Callie had always been an uncommonly observant and analytical little dog, and it was fascinating to watch her figure out how to go down stairs she could barely see. She'd lie on her chest at the top, then reach down with one short little Corgi arm until she touched the first step. Then she'd put her other hand down, and she'd know where she was going.

If she was wide awake, she'd get a cautious rhythm going and come down to the first landing, where she'd pause and start her "feeling-my-way" process again. And so on, until she'd gone all the way downstairs. But when sleepy, she'd actually bring her back legs down to the same step her hands were on, and she'd end up standing parallel to the steps, carefully continuing one step at a time (like when toddlers go down step by step on their tiny butts). It was amazing to see clever Callie figure out how to compensate. But it was also troubling to see our elderly little dog have trouble negotiating her environment.

To help her gain confidence, we started luring her down with treats. That helped a little bit, but there were still times when she was really afraid to tackle those steps. That's when I decided to combine this with clicker training. As I've written before, clicker training turns learning into a fun game for dogs of all ages—we'd only introduced it to Callie and Mickey a couple of years earlier, and they were immediately enthusiastic about any kind of clicker games.

The idea, initially, is to click and treat for an easy task, or the easiest component of a more difficult task—in this case, Callie got her *CLICK-TREAT!* just for touching the first step with her hand. Then she'd get another *CLICK-TREAT!* when she reached the first landing...and on down the steps to the bottom. Callie thought this game was great fun!

Then I changed the rules a little bit—she'd only get the *CLICK-TREAT!* when she reached each landing. No problem! Within a few days she was eagerly advancing to each landing without hesitation. In a few weeks, we didn't need the clicker anymore; she'd still get a treat at each landing and at the bottom, and she overcame her step-anxiety to the point that she'd actually elbow her sister Mickey out of the way in order to go down first.

Clicker training can apply to just about *any* learning situation and it's the ideal way to overcome fear, anxiety, aggression and a host of other behavioral issues. As with Callie's example, since you can't predict how the application of clicker training might help your dog someday, it's a great idea to introduce it as a fun game right away. Then, if you ever need it to fix a complicated problem or modify a troublesome behavior, your dog will already love playing clicker games—and you'll be halfway toward a painless solution!

