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Dog-gone discipline

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A simple name change from a "click" to a "tag" opened up the world for a local dance teacher.

A training method for dancers that began as a method to offer positive reinforcement to dogs was introduced to the community two years ago as TAGteach, the "TAG" short for "Teaching with Acoustical Guidance." The "TAG" device is a clicker that fits in the palm of the instructor's hand, allowing him or her to produce a distinct "click" sound to mark a moment in time at which an action - for dancers, a move; for dogs, a trick or command - is performed correctly. The sound becomes an acoustical binary message, which the brain quickly processes, which in turn speeds muscle learning.

To be "tagged" is a good thing. If you haven't been tagged, the non-verbal message is, "Try again."

Skinner influence

Behavioral biologist and CEO of TAGteach International Karen Pryor "is the goddess of clicker training," explains local co-founder Beth Wheeler. Animal trainers initially used the clickers as positive-reinforcement tools in their work with dogs and dolphins. A dolphin trainer herself and author of "Don't Shoot the Dog," Pryor developed her idea of marking good behavior with the audio cue from her research into the work of B.F. Skinner.

Skinner, who originally used rats in the "Skinner box" to prove his psychological theory on operative conditioning, opened the door for altering behavior based on positive reinforcement, rather than disciplinary action.

Since the 1960s, marine mammals and other animals have been trained with a sound or a light, which signals the creature's nervous system to repeat the action that earned them the positive response.

Move over Flipper

The move to begin using the clicker with humans happened almost by accident. Gymnastics coach Theresa McKeon had been using the clicking system with her horses, and one day she began to wonder if she could use it with her students. She took the device with her to the gymnasium and knew almost immediately she was onto something.

Over time, in fact, another benefit of using the clicker revealed itself, this one unique to humans. Two students could use the clicker, and there would be benefits on either end.



Says McKeon, "Children can 'tag' each other, and both partners benefit. When a student watches, she'll perform the activity mentally to learn it, even if there is no physical movement involved."

There was, however, the little matter of the name.

When TAGteach originators McKeon and Joan Orr contacted Pryor, they knew they had to change the "clicker training" moniker in order to make it appeal to humans, and on an international level. McKeon contacted her best friend and former college roommate, Wheeler, who is also director of A Dancer's Dream in Marblehead.

"I've got to show you this," McKeon told Wheeler before showing her the clicking device for the first time.

McKeon explained that she had gotten tired of raising her voice to teach her students proper movement techniques and had turned to the hand-held clicker.

Between the four women, TAGteach International was born. After successfully using the instructional techniques with their own students, the quartet decided to produce a TAGdance CD box set. Since its December 2005 release, over 100 CD sets have sold, and a second production is now in the works.

The CD set includes video and exercises tailored toward proper tag techniques. It begins with basic physical tasks, such as the steps necessary to tie a necktie, use a hula hoop and jump rope, to name a few. The language of teaching to tag is always positive, and the CD includes a lesson on words for teachers to avoid, for example, comments such as "I'll tag you if you don't bend over." The better option would be to say, "OK, the tag point is ... stand up straight."

It also includes some business advice for teachers, noting that better management techniques would allow them to increase class size, which in turn would lead to more profit.

Working it

The initial idea was to use TAGteach for teaching specific stages in a jazz dance class. When the idea grew to include ballet classes, the reaction from students and teachers, according to Wheeler, was, "No, it can't be done."

Not only could it be done, but TAGteach is now used as a tool in ballet, jazz and acrobatic classes.

"As a dancer, 'pull up' can mean pull your ribs under, straight or forward, or it could mean suck your belly button in," explains Wheeler. "I found that when I taught, language got in my way. Now my students hear the click when a move is performed correctly and they realize, 'Oh, that's what she's looking for.'"



In addition, dance students have learned to tag each other while doing barre work, which saves teachers one-on-one time, enabling larger class size.

As a bonus to the confidence-building audio technique, McKeon's son developed what he named "tagulators," which are beaded strings for tallying the number of tags received during dance class. At the end of each class, students turn in their beads for stickers, treats or allowances to be excused from class early.

"If they want the sticker, they'll work for it," says Wheeler.

Detour

The TAGteach method can apply to anyone or anything that desires a positive teaching or training environment, the group says.

"It's not just about dance," says Wheeler. "TAGteach has been utilized in all aspects of physical education."

Wheeler and Frank Corcoran of LivingWell Affiliated Massage Therapists in Marblehead will present a seminar at the upcoming National Dance Association convention at the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance in Salt Lake City. Corcoran, a certified TAGteacher, uses the technique in his field of massage therapy and Pilates mat training.

"I work with professional athletes, as well as 'real life' athletes," shares Corcoran. "People who develop pain, whether derived from a sports injury or from daily activity, already understand that they need to move differently in order to ease their pain. Getting them to understand the (new) movement concepts that will help ease such pain can be a difficult task. One would think using descriptive language would be helpful. However, language is often confusing and doesn't translate into movement easily. A phrase such as, 'stand up straight' means different things to different people."

TAGteach allows Corcoran a more effective tool to work with his clients.

Diversity realized

The more attention TAGteach received, the more people in diverse fields wanted to try to apply the methodology. For instance, tagging has been incorporated in classes ranging from math to horse riding and by swim teams. Of course, for the swim team, a whistle or flashlight works better than the clicker. In fact, you really don't need the clicking device at all, admits the group. Any consistent auditory message, such as a snap or the sound of a kiss, will do.

Educators have also found applications for TAGteach. Children with attention-deficit disorder (ADD) are being tagged, and they behave better as a result, says Wheeler. In



addition to children with learning disabilities, tagging has proven successful in helping the mentally disabled.

"TAGteach is hugely effective in the special-education community, particularly with autism," says Wheeler.

One of her certified TAGteachers, autism specialist Victoria Fogel, formerly worked with Applied Behavior Consultants Inc., which had conducted a preliminary study on TAGteaching. Fogel's autism study revealed a 30-percent increase in communication skills using the method.

At the time she worked with ABC, Fogel was the organization's only certified TAG teacher. She has since moved on to work for the University of Florida, where she is a board-certified associate behavior analyst. ABC is now sending four of its employees to the next TAG seminar in Portland. They plan on utilizing TAG school-wide following the training.

"We used TAG in the school environment," says Fogel. "The parents were not directly involved, but after the study, we showed the results to them, and they were very excited."

One parent requested to be trained so that she may implement TAG at home with her son.

Fogel continues, "One of the most powerful effects of utilizing TAG to teach new behaviors and/or skills is its effect on the teacher. It requires the teacher to be more specific, observable and measurable when they are teaching and analyzing behaviors. TAG challenges the teacher to breakdown tasks, sometimes breaking behaviors down to very simple, small muscle movements, and to focus on increasing the behaviors and skills they desire in their students."

Because of the deficits in the area of communication that may be present with a child diagnosed with autism, it is extremely important that the teacher is clear, specific and consistent when teaching.

Certification

Thanks to an informative Web site, the global demand for certified TAGteachers has grown rapidly. In response, Wheeler has presented TAGteach seminars in faraway places such as Norway, Sweden and Iceland, proving there is no language barrier when it comes to tagging.

"We've never had to translate our tests, except for the question-and-answer portion, which is translated live, and again for a Braille attendee who wanted to train a seeing-eye horse," explains Wheeler.



Her last seminar was in England, where she spent 10 days helping others with basic physical movements as part of the TAGteach method.

Says Pryor, "[Wheeler] is a gifted teacher who is fun to watch, which is why people are coming to her."

Some TAGteach team presentations have been sponsored by sports interests, such as soccer and golf groups, but they have also been presented to behaviorist organizations.

"Tagging is a good system, whether it's used for tennis instruction, teaching an autistic child how to pronounce the letter 'T' or for the mainstream child to learn to tie a shoelace," says Pryor.

Seminar attendees have included classroom educators, driving instructors, coaches and trainers in numerous amateur and professional sports, psychologists, precision teachers, family therapists, physical and occupational therapists and, of course, dance teachers.

The most unusual tagger, Pryor and Wheeler say, was a nuclear-facility manager, who uses TAGteach for reinforcement of safety issues within his staff.

Aside from the rewards tagging offers to these professionals in the performance of their jobs, Wheeler and Pryor offer certification as a way for educators and trainers to become more valuable to a potential employer.

The cost for certification training is \$199 for the program audit fee and \$199 for a weekend seminar. The certification fee is \$425, and offers a \$50 discount for registering early.

Gone to the dogs?

In October, Wheeler taught people how to TAGteach in order to help them dance with their dogs, which she says is a popular new sport in England.

"At first, I thought it was hysterical," says Wheeler. "Imagine a dance routine with your partner as a dog. But it's a hobby. These people have dog dance events in costume."

Wheeler doesn't want to teach her own dog to dance with her, but she's happy to teach people who really don't have a lot of movement background to go out and perform with their dogs.

Beyond dancing with dogs, a more pressing goal for TAGteach, say its developers, is to get the method incorporated into the school system.

For more information on TAGteach, visit www.tagteach.com or call 1-877-TAG-0002.