

## **Shaping Your Dog's Behavior**

**Increase the fitness of your shaping skills; get back on track with some dog training shaping practice drills.**

By Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA

Like many dog trainers who use and teach dog-friendly training, I'm a huge fan of the dog training technique called "shaping." In a nutshell, shaping requires clearly defining the end behavior that you want your dog to learn, and starting the training process by identifying the smallest, easiest criteria that you will mark (with a discrete signal, usually the "click!" of a clicker) and immediately reward (usually with a small, delicious food treat). The rest of the process involves systematically adding criteria – or levels of difficulty – to the behaviors your dog offers (in order to elicit your click and treat). The goal is to gradually encourage your dog to make his way toward the end behavior – your goal behavior.

I love shaping because it's completely force-free, rewards the dog for being creative and showing initiative, and because it's just plain fun to watch as a dog excitedly works out the answer to a puzzle presented to him by his handler.

Novice trainers and dog owners also usually find shaping to be really exciting and fun – at least, at first. When someone is first shown how quickly she can get her dog to do something complicated, without ever saying a word or pushing or pulling or coercing the dog in any way, most people start using it to try to teach their dogs all sorts of things, from the basics like sit, down, and targeting (touching something with a nose, paw, or other body part), to more complicated things like turning on light switches and learning fancy freestyle dance moves.

### **Confusion and Frustration are the Enemies of Dog Training with Shaping**

The excitement, however, can be short-lived. In their enthusiasm for their newfound ability to get the dog to offer all sorts of behaviors, and their dog's apparent quick progress, some people can inadvertently become sloppy trainers and expect too much too quickly from their dog – and then suddenly everything falls apart. The trainer can elicit all sorts of behavior from the dog, just

not the ones she wanted . . . or she gets the right behavior, but only randomly, not reliably enough to “put it on cue.”

Just as often, frustration can easily develop. Like a player in a game of charades who can't guess the answer no matter how many clues he's given, the dog gives up and quits playing the game.

When confusion or frustration set in, and the pair has lost confidence and interest in the game, I like to use a very specific practice exercise to restore both my client's success at this valuable technique, and her dog's understanding and enthusiasm for shaping.

## **When Dog Trainers Lose Focus**

In my experience, when things start to fall apart during shaping sessions, it's most often because the handler gets distracted or loses focus. Shaping requires a lot of mental multi-tasking on the part of the trainer, and if you've ever engaged in multi-tasking, you know that the more skilled you are at performing each individual task on its own, the easier it is to try to juggle them all at once.

When a trainer loses focus during a shaping session, it is usually tied to her own enthusiasm; she gets overly inspired or amused by some of the various behaviors the dog offers, and she either skips some important steps and tries to race to the finish line, or sometimes even changes the end goal behavior she's trying to get the dog to perform, in midstream!

## **Dog Training Basics for Shaping Success**

The best way to counteract these stumbling blocks is to go back to basics and work on some of your training mechanics. Just as athletes will do exercise drills or musicians will practice scales to perfect their skills, trainers need to practice their mechanics. How sharp your training skills are will determine how quickly your dog figures out what it is you want him to do. You need to be able to:

- 1. Notice** the exact moment your dog does the behavior you're looking for, whether it's an ear flick or a paw lift. That means you need to sharpen your observation skills to make sure you don't miss it, especially since many of these behaviors are very tiny and very fast.
- 2. Click** at the right moment. Your timing needs to be spot-on to help your dog recognize exactly what movement earned him that click.
- 3. Be quiet.** Don't talk, don't move. You want the click to be the only thing that provides any relevant feedback for your dog (followed by a treat to reinforce, of course). Otherwise, any other stimulus on your part risks eclipsing or overshadowing the information you want to relay to your dog.

While these three skills are crucial to clicker training, perhaps the most important (and often underestimated) element of this training method is the ability to break down the path to the desired behavior into small steps, or “criteria,” and then stick to that path as closely as possible.

For example, the various steps or criteria to achieve “Go to your mat” – where the end behavior is your dog lying down and staying on his mat – might look something like this:

**You and your dog are standing close to his mat. You have a pouch full of treats and a clicker. Your dog is likely staring at you (or the treat pouch). You want him to interact with the mat, but he’s extremely focused on you at the moment. In order to get the process moving, you’ll need to find the smallest, easiest criteria that you can reinforce.**

- 1. Your dog’s ear flicks in the direction of the mat. Click/treat (C/T)!**
- 2. Your dog’s eyes glance fleetingly toward the mat. C/T.**
- 3. Your dog’s snout turns in the direction of the mat. C/T.**
- 4. Your dog’s head turns toward the mat. C/T.**
- 5. He turns his head and begins to lift a paw toward the mat. C/T.**
- 6. He turns his head, lifts a paw, and turns his shoulders toward the mat. C/T.**
- 7. He takes one small step toward the mat. C/T.**

You see where this is going. Before launching a training program to achieve an end behavior, it’s helpful to have these steps – or sessions – thought out in advance, so you have an idea of the criteria you’ll be looking for. On paper, it always looks as neat and orderly as the list of criteria for “Go to your mat.” In real life, it’s not always so linear and often doesn’t always progress quite as we thought it would. Keep in mind that shaping requires flexibility and the ability to think on your feet. For the purposes of the following practice drill, however, the emphasis will be on slowing things down and maintaining your focus.

## **Curbing Your Distractions While Training**

If you’re still not sure why it’s helpful for trainers to sharpen our focusing skills, consider how multi-tasking without proper focus can go ridiculously wrong. This true-life scenario involving my recent attempt to eat a snack evolved into a comical event that many people can relate to – random task juggling. We’ve all done it! We start with the intent of tackling one task and are easily distracted by another task that we decide needs our immediate attention, followed by yet another task, and so on and so on, until we’re left with a trail of unfinished tasks behind us. At the end of the day we feel we’ve been extremely busy, and yet we haven’t actually accomplished anything.

I had a simple goal: To eat an orange. Instead, I allowed myself to become distracted with various other tasks, one after the other. My parade of behaviors started when I walked into the kitchen in the morning to get an orange. Before getting one from the fruit bowl, I reached for a sheet of paper towel for the orange peel and noticed we needed a new roll.

I walked to the laundry room where we keep the replacement rolls and noticed a stack of folded laundry that needed to be taken upstairs. I forgot about the paper towel roll and carried the folded

laundry to the bedroom upstairs. On my way to the bedroom, I glanced into my office, where I noticed some new email notices had popped up on my computer screen. I put the folded laundry on my filing cabinet and sat down at my desk to reply to the emails, which took a while, and I became thirsty. So I walked downstairs to get a glass of water from the kitchen and I remembered my orange!

I should have stuck to one task (eat my orange!), or at the very least, completed each task as I came across it. Instead, I got sidetracked and engaged in a list of unrelated behaviors that in the end didn't accomplish much.

It's very easy to become this distracted during a shaping session, causing confusion and frustration for your learner, and disappointment for you, the trainer, when you don't reach your end goal. If you come back to the basics now and then, and do a few focus practice drills, sticking to a steady and systematic approach to choosing and increasing criteria, you'll end up enjoying the sweet, juicy taste of success much sooner!

### **Shaping Drill – Focus Your Dog!**

Each of the steps outlined in the plan above represents a criterion – a step toward the end behavior. To sharpen your focus and to avoid wandering off the path, treat each criterion as a short, separate shaping session.

Select a criterion, set a timer for 30 to 60 seconds (or count out a certain number of treats that you'll use to reinforce that criterion and only that criterion), and focus like a laser beam on marking and reinforcing that behavior only during that shaping session.

For example, say that in a specific, one-minute-or-less session you decide you're going to look for and C/T a head turn. Good; focus on that and nothing else in that single session. It might be tempting to jump on the opportunity to C/T a new and unexpected behavior that your dog offers, but for now, help your dog understand precisely what it is he's doing right by keeping your focus lean and clean.

When your time is up or your treats are gone, take a short break to think about what your next criterion will be.

Remember to let the dog know that the session is finished so that he doesn't inadvertently continue to offer you behaviors that you're not even paying attention to anymore. To end a session, I like to say "All done!" and play with the dog for just a few seconds.

During this practice drill, if you decide at the very start of a short training session that you will look for, mark, and reinforce a head turn, you must resist the temptation to pile on criteria mid-session just because the dog is offering them randomly, or because these new behaviors look more interesting or are a step ahead of the one you originally had in mind.

Pick one criterion and focus, focus, focus! If you think of another behavior you'd like to add to your list of criteria, make a mental note and work on it later. Keep in mind that the more you

practice shaping techniques with your dog, the better he'll become at offering different behaviors to figure out what you want, and the more likely he will learn to anticipate the direction of where a session is going. Until then, keep your communication as a trainer as clear, clean, and concise as possible.

## Shaping a Fast-Learning Dog

Shaping is about marking and reinforcing tiny steps toward an end behavior. While the progress should unfold systematically, sometimes the dog guesses the end behavior much faster than we anticipated. This is more common with dogs who are trained regularly using a shaping technique. They learn to anticipate that we will want more from them, and they'll offer truckloads of different behaviors in rapid-fire succession until they get the feedback they're listening for: "Click!"

Many canine veterans of shaping sessions also learn that when there's a prop or accessory present, they are probably supposed to interact with it, whether it's a target stick, box, mat, or any other novel item. If you're using a prop – whether with a dog who's a shaping rookie or with a seasoned clicker-training veteran – make sure you're ready to mark and reinforce any interaction with it from the nanosecond you present your prop. Have your thumb on the clicker and your treats nearby, and keep a close eye on your dog. You don't want to miss anything!

If your dog guesses the end behavior very quickly and offers it repeatedly, you can jump ahead to the following steps:

**1. Add a Cue.** If the end behavior is for your dog to go lie down on his mat and he's offering it consistently and correctly, go ahead and let him know what that behavior is called.

To add a verbal cue, say the cue *immediately before* your dog does the end behavior. For example, if the end behavior is for your dog to lie down on his mat, you can say, "Go to your mat" at the precise moment that he lowers himself into a "down" position on the mat. Over several more repetitions, gradually begin saying your cue earlier. For example, begin saying it immediately before he lowers himself into a down, while he's still standing. Then begin saying it as he steps onto the mat; then as he's walking toward the mat.

**2. Increase the quality of the behavior.** As an additional challenge, you can fine-tune the quality of the behavior by raising your criteria a bit. "Quality" includes features such as duration and speed.

For example, continue shaping to get a longer-lasting "down" on the mat by delaying the click/treat by short increments. Or increase the speed of your dog's response to the "Go to your mat" cue by clicking and treating only the faster ones. Remember, though, that if you're changing the criteria you'll need to do it systematically; choose just one criterion at a time and focus on marking and reinforcing just the one.

**3. Change the context of the behavior.** Now, we want to "generalize" the behavior, to make sure your dog still understands the cue in different contexts.

Try giving your dog the cue from a different location. If you began by standing to the right of the mat, try moving to the left of the mat. Change your own physical position; if you were standing, try sitting, then with your back turned, or while lying down. Change the location of the mat, at first within your home, and then outside your home, in other locations entirely. (Targeting a mat with a “down” behavior is especially useful when visiting friends and family, when at the vet’s office, or at a dog-friendly café!)

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