Shaping, Luring and Targeting
Getting the Behavior You Want

Shaping

Shaping requires good patience and observational skills. It also requires great timing. **Free-shaping**, means capturing a behavior you like by clicking to mark the correct behavior, following with a reward and then systematically rewarding behaviors closer and closer to your goal behavior. In other words, the dog offers behaviors and we choose those we want to reinforce. The dog experiments with behaviors. It's important that we foster an atmosphere that allows this experimentation; no behavior that your dog offers is considered wrong. He is allowed to try new things until one pays off. When the dog has the general concept, we can use shaping to design and strengthen specific behaviors. We reward and reinforce behavior that approximates, or which we believe will lead to our ultimate goal, the target behavior.

Be a "splitter" not a "lumper"

Shaping entails building and molding the dog to reach behavior step by step. We reinforce small steps in the right direction. We are breaking down behavior into small steps rewarding each in a string of steps in the right direction until the final behavior is reached. It's important to envision small behavioral steps that lead to the ultimate goal. This is called splitting. We split behaviors into their smallest components and reinforce each part. The opposite of splitting is lumping, which is waiting for the final behavior before reinforcing. Lumpers wait too long and wait for the completed behavior before they reinforce. This can lead to uncertainty and confusion in your dog.

An example of splitting and reinforcing small behaviors to get your dog to climb into a box, for instance, may include these small steps:
♦ Reward looking at the box
♦ Reward moving toward the box
♦ Reward touching the box with a nose
♦ Reward touching the box with a paw
♦ Reward placing one paw inside the box; and so on, until the final behavior is reached.
As your dog succeeds at one small portion, you raise the criteria and expect a little more before rewarding. Wait it out and see what your dog will offer. Allow your dog the freedom to experiment to try to please you and receive reinforcement.

Luring

To lure a dog into a behavior we use something the dog wants (food or toy) and encourage him to follow the lure. When the dog moves in the way we desire, the lure is given as a reinforcer. Luring is a quick and easy way to get the dog to move into a physical position. It can seem successful quickly, but this is an illusion. The presence of the lure is overwhelming and the dog is not thinking about what he is doing, so very little real training is taking place. To be effective, it must be faded quickly. Use the lure for a few repetitions, then try to get the same behavior using the same hand motion without the lure present. Any attempt to follow your hand should be marked (such as with a clicker) and reinforced (immediately with a treat or other reinforcer). Mix it up; do one with the lure, some without, etc, until the dog responds to the hand motion as well as the response to the lure.

Target

A target is an object the dog will approach and touch, either with his nose or paw. Examples of targets include a hand, container lid, or obstacle such as the agility table. This is especially valuable in agility to teach independent obstacle performance and distance work. It teaches the dog to move away confidently and enthusiastically. Reward first an interest in the object, then moving towards it, then touching it, just like the steps outlined above. Continue refining the shaping process until you get the nose touch.

Target vs. Lure
A lure is a primary reinforcer (such as a treat) that causes the dog to perform the behavior. A target is a non-lured object that the dog moves toward. When the primary reinforcer is placed on the target, it becomes a lure. This can work but it must be faded after a few repetitions. Teach the dog to target using shaping. Reward first an interest in the target, then moving toward it, then touching it, similar to the steps described above. Refine the nose touch with a continuation of the shaping process.

Naming the behavior
The last part of getting behaviors is putting them on a verbal cue. Avoid putting a name on a behavior until we are getting it regularly and it looks the way we want it to. The name "freezes" the behavior in its current form. If you don't like what you have, don't name it yet! Start to add the verbal cue when you are 99% sure your dog will offer the behavior.

If the behavior is taught with luring and then you added a hand motion, the cue is added just before the hand motion.
♦ Say the cue,
♦ Wait a second,
♦ Then use the hand motion.

Reinforce generously when the dog starts to respond before the hand signal. The hand signal can be faded when the dog is offering the behavior before your hand motion is given.

To change ugly behavior, start the training from the beginning and rename it. So if your dog's heel is not what you want it to be, start the heel training from the beginning and add the new cue word after your dog is regularly offering the behavior the way you want it to look.

Premack Principle
This is a simple but powerful concept that basically states that the less likely behavior can be reinforced by the more likely behavior OR in other words, to get what you (the dog) want, do what I want. Before giving your dog something he wants (food, play, exit from his crate) it's the time to require a behavior from him.

Require self-control behavior--sustained eye contact, sit, stay, etc—before he gets what he wants. We do not cue him for this behavior; we wait for him to offer it. He learns to offer it quickly so that he can get what he wants faster. Win-win! It creates a thinking dog.

This is simple and easy to put into practice. Don't give your dog anything for free. Be sure you always use a verbal release, "Ok!" to give your dog permission to do what he wants. The verbal release puts you in control of the situation and makes you important to your dog.

Here are Dr. Sophia Yin's tips on shaping behavior and raising criteria.

Don't worry if your dog's not a genius at free-shaping. You'll learn much more from him than you will from a dog that makes mental leaps and figures things out on his own. Here are some tips.
- Be aware that the **location of the food reward is important**. Animals want to orient to the direction of the treat. So if, every time your dog looks at the box you toss the kibble/treat into the box, he'll quickly learn that the box is something good and he should orient toward it. After that you can deliver the treat when you're sitting away from the box, but if he gets stuck you can reward a few more times by tossing the treat in the box.
- **Reward a step enough time so he's sure of what he's doing is right**. For instance, you might reward the same exact step 5 times before you increase your expectations. So if your dog reaches into the box with his head, reward this behavior 5 time and then raise the criterion to reaching into the box with his head and slightly lifting one foot. By rewarding something easy a bunch of times you're gaining what is called **behavioral momentum**. If he has lots of success doing something easy at first, he will be more resilient to giving up when it gets a little harder.

- **If your dog starts to get stuck you may need to decrease your expectation before he gives up.** Note that sometimes I wait quite a bit of time for Zoe. I can see her thinking and trying to solve the problem and I have first rewarded her quite a bit for the previous step. But when I get the feeling, based on my experience with her, that it's too hard, I reward something easier a few times.
- **Take a break if needed.** Free-shaping can be a big brain strain for animals. So if you stop after just a minute or two and then come back to it a even just a minute later, he may do much better.
- **Have a plan or stop to revise your plan** if your pooch does something unusual.
- **Have a clear picture of what you're rewarding in your head**. If you don't, you don't won't know what you want either.
- **Practice on people and have people practice with you.** Humans have all the same problems playing the part of the pet as dogs do. You'll have a better appreciation of what the pet goes through if you subject yourself to someone else's training. (Stay tuned for upcoming blog on Saturday, January 9th).
- **Sometimes behaviors don't have to be completely free-shaped**. You can manipulate the environment to increase the likelihood the individual will do something close to what you want so that you can get started. Just be sure you only do it few times and then don't need it anymore. For instance, if you're trying to train your dog to head over to a certain part of the room, you can toss a treat in that direction a few times. Better yet, do something that makes them orient in that direction but requires no movement that the dog can see on your part. Or if you want him to turn, say 45°, you can place something he likes such as a toy at 90° to the direction he's facing. Then as he starts to orient to it but well before he's turned the 90°, you can click and treat. Once he orients several times, then remove the toy and see if he'll orient in that direction since you're rewarded it already.
- **Stop while you and your dog are still having fun and experiencing success.**