Why Shape?

Some common questions/comments that we hear:

- Why can't I just show my dog what to do or physically manipulate him into what I want?
- Doesn't shaping take a lot longer than more physical methods?
- Why can't I just lure my dog to get the behavior?
- Shaping doesn't work for all dogs; I'm sure my dog is one of those.
- Isn't this like expecting my dog to read my mind?

<u>What is shaping?</u>

First of all, what exactly do we mean by 'shaping'? The term is often used interchangeably with clicker training. But you don't necessarily need to use a clicker to shape (although it helps with timing) and every use of a clicker isn't necessarily shaping. To shape, you do need a way to tell the dog immediately when he's done something right, but this can be done with either a word or a clicker. Some studies have shown that the distinctive sound of the clicker does help the dog learn faster (which is why we recommend its use), but many people have successfully shaped using a word, a flash of light, a buzzer, a whistle, a tap, a thumbs up, or other type of marker. The marker pinpoints for the dog the exact split second he did the action that earned him the reward and increases the chances that he'll repeat that behavior.

Shaping is a process used to teach a complex behavior that the dog is unlikely to perform on his own. Simple behaviors, such as sitting, you may be able to just wait until the dog sits and then click the action and reward it. A more complex behavior, such as standing still on a board with 2 feet on the board and 2 feet on the floor, is unlikely to happen on its own. If you wait for the dog to do it on his own, you could be waiting all day and your dog would get bored and go find something better to do.

Throughout all training, you want to maintain a high rate of success so that your dog has fun learning and is always eager to continue working. Dogs who are bored or stressed won't learn quickly. So when we train a behavior that the dog is unlikely to do on his own, we break it down into small pieces that are easy for the dog to learn, and use the reward marker to teach each individual piece. As the dog learns one small piece, he'll perform it often enough that now you can start only rewarding repetitions that are closer to the next step of what you want. In this way, you gradually change or add to the initial behavior in small increments (shaping the behavior), until the dog is doing the whole behavior.

<u>Example of shaping</u>

We want the dog to get into a 2on2off position on a contact board (2on2off means the two back paws are on the board and the front paws are on the floor and the dog stays in this position until released). So at first you put the board on the floor and click/treat every time the dog looks or moves towards it. Pretty soon he figures out the board gets him treats and you can hardly keep him away from it. So it's very easy to withhold the click until he touches it with one paw. If you had started out waiting for a paw touch, he might have looked at or sniffed the board a couple times (without putting a paw on it), decided it wasn't interesting, and gone off to find better things to do. By rewarding a smaller step (looking at the board) we increased the likelihood that we would see the next step (a paw touch).

Once he figures out that touching gets rewards, wait for two paws, then for the dog to get on with all four. Once you can reliably predict that he'll eagerly run and get on with all four feet, now you can start rewarding for putting a front paw on the floor, then two paws (while keeping the back feet on), and then lengthen the duration that he holds that position.

Now you're probably wondering, why we don't just start off clicking for the back feet going on? Why click front feet on the board if we ultimately want front feet on the ground? The reason we don't do it that way is that in shaping you want to pick a behavior that your dog is likely to perform and use it as a stepping stone to the next behavior. How many dogs do you know who would investigate a board on the ground by approaching it with their back ends? What are the chances that first contact with the board would ever be with a rear paw (vs a front paw)? Compare this to how easy it is to get back feet on and front feet off when the dog is already on the board and just needs to put his front paws off the end. This is an example of how you shape using behaviors that are likely to occur, and you shape by rewarding behaviors that will <u>lead to</u> the final behavior, even if they seem counter-productive at first (you want back feet touching so it may seem counter-productive at first to reward for front feet touching).

<u>Doesn't shaping take a lot longer than more physical methods?</u>

You might say "Wow, that sounds like a lot of steps, won't it take forever for the dog to learn all that? Wouldn't it be quicker to take a leash, or my hands, and just put the dog on the board?"

The process often goes extremely quickly; it can sometimes take longer to describe it in writing than it takes to actually do it. I have had young dogs learn the complete 2on2off position within a couple of 2-3 minute training sessions (and a few of them within only about 2 minutes). They not only learned it, but because they thought it was all their idea, they absolutely loved doing it and performed with a lot of enthusiasm. I had to hide the board when we were done because the dog wouldn't stop working. That is the attitude we want in our dogs for everything we teach! If this is your first time shaping a behavior, it may take a little bit longer because you're timing won't be as good and you're likely to miss some reward opportunities. But once you and your dog understand the method with one behavior, subsequent ones will be learned even more quickly and you have a powerful training tool for the rest of your dog's life.

So you may ask, if I had taken the dog and just put him on the board and given him a treat, wouldn't that still have been faster? Maybe for some dogs, but for most, probably not. First, most dogs don't find it that fun to be picked up (or pulled with a leash) and put onto some strange board they've never seen before. So you're already starting out the situation by making the dog a bit uncomfortable.

But let's assume you have an easy-going agreeable dog who really doesn't mind that much. He's very happy to let you put him on the board and give him treats, no problem there. So you're getting his body to do the behavior almost instantly (faster than you would have from shaping), but what is going on your dog's head? Does he understand exactly what earned him the treat? He may be thinking 'you put me somewhere and I let you do it and that gets a treat'. So he may let you place him there all day but never think to go there on his own for the treat. He may believe the exercise is 'don't move', or 'stand next to Mom and look at her'. You really don't know what's going on in his head because he never had to show you, through his actions, what he thought was earning the reward. He can just go along with whatever you make him do, without thinking about what he's doing. So placing him may LOOK faster if you just look at the physical action. But when you consider what you're putting into your dog's head, physical manipulation is typically much, much slower than shaping.

When we shape, the dog is making choices and getting immediate feedback on his choice – so when he gets a click, the last thought in his head was about the board or what he was doing with his feet on the board, because he was making a conscious effort to figure out what would earn the reward. If you just picked him up or guided him with a leash, you overwhelm his attention and his last thought before the click was about you more than about the board or what his feet were doing. This makes the behavior more about you than about the equipment and actually distracts the dog from learning. It will also make it very hard later for the dog to understand to perform the behavior regardless of where you are or what you're doing, because you were an integral part of the behavior the way he first learned it. These are the dogs you may see at trials who will only hold a contact if the handler is right next to them reminding them what to do.

Why can't I just lure my dog to get the behavior?

Luring has similar issues to physical manipulation. If you get your dog on the board by just putting a treat on there, then the presence of the treat becomes the cue for the behavior. In addition, he may be so focused on just grabbing the treat that he pays no attention to the actual board or what his feet are doing. It's just 'see treat, get treat'. If you wait for him to first offer a behavior, then the presence of the board becomes the cue for the behavior and he learns from the start that a reward is coming even if he doesn't see one before he acts. He learns to trust you that good behavior will be rewarded even when he doesn't see a treat first. Luring can be helpful at times for getting a dog over a learning hump or just building up a good association with a particular situation, but until the dog can offer the behavior in the absence of a lure, you won't really know if he's learned it. That is why, whenever possible, it's preferable to do the initial training without luring the dog.

Shaping doesn't work for all dogs. I'm sure my dog is one of those.

Shaping is based on scientifically proven methods of learning. In zoos, animals will often be shaped to for various behaviors aiding in their care and treatment, because you can't put a leash on a gorilla, tiger, or dolphin and just make them do what you want. Chickens, cats, horses, zoo animals, even goldfish, have been trained using this method. The average dog is at least as smart as a goldfish! When the method fails, it's usually because the behavior hasn't been broken into enough pieces, the reward isn't good enough, or the animal is stressed or fearful and unable to focus on learning.

<u>Isn't this like expecting my dog to read my mind?</u>

If you break the behavior into chunks that are too big, then yes, the dog really won't have a chance to figure out what to do unless he can read your mind. Try to avoid turning it into a staring contest – where the dog and you just stand there staring at each other waiting for a miracle to happen and the dog to suddenly figure it all out. The trick is to reward small enough parts of the behavior and set up the situation in such a way that the dog can be right fairly frequently with very little effort. He will need to make choices on what behavior he offers you, but the choices should be fairly obvious ones so he hits on the right answer quickly and doesn't need to be a mind reader.