Shaping a Behavior – or...
Can your dog read your mind?

Of course he can! You'll probably swear to it after you've shaped a few behaviors, and you can tell your friends this is the case. But you'll know the truth - that he's offering you behaviors because he's been reinforced repeatedly for those behaviors - and he even figured out what works (i.e., what you want. There you go, he can read your mind!).

I like to "shape behaviors" because this method is 100% hands-off and the dog gets to decide what to do - or so he thinks. This method empowers dogs to use their brains - and they do have brains - to figure out how to earn the reinforcement. It's the most rewarding method I've used to train dogs, and I'm talking about rewarding to me, as well as to the dog!

To teach a dog a new behavior, a good trainer will divide the behavior into small "slices" - pieces of behavior that when put together form the final action we want the dog to perform.

For example, to sit in front of you, your dog must first lift his head up, shift weight back, slide his rear legs forward while dropping his haunches… In shaping a sit, each of those pieces would be clicked and treated multiple times. The more pieces a desired behavior is sliced into and each of those pieces reinforced, the more solidly the dog learns the final desired behavior.

Playing the following game with your dog will give you an idea of how the act of reinforcing small behaviors will lead to a dog happily learning things you never dreamed of!

101 Things Your Dog Can Do with a Box

Find a cardboard box, of a size that your dog might comfortably sit or stand in, and low enough that he can get into it without interfering with his motion. In a quiet room, with no other dogs or cats and relative peace, place the box on the floor.

Immediately click and treat any attention your dog pays to the box. First, click and treat a glance toward the box several times; then a longer look at the box; then a step toward the box; another step; sniffing the box; stepping in it, etc. You're not really training anything specific here - just reinforcing the concept that you will reward offered behaviors, and the dog is in charge of which behaviors he does.

Everyone wants a guideline for how many times to reinforce each progressive behavior. This is dependent on the dog, but generally two or three reinforcements for each step will do. You don't want the dog to get "stuck" at one level. However, if he suddenly stops offering behaviors (doesn't know what to do), reinforce at the previous level another time or two and then wait for a next behavior. There's a balance that we seek here - we need the dog to keep trying, and when he gets confused he could shut down, so going back and reinforcing a previous approximation helps to keep him in the game.

An approximation is a slice of behavior. We are "reinforcing progressive approximations" when we shape behaviors.

You should limit these sessions, no matter how much fun you're having, to one or two minutes each. You can use the TV commercial model (see below) - bring the box out for one commercial, put it away, and then get it out for the next one (well, since they run 5 or 6 commercials during a break, just play during one commercial per commercial break).

How to Shape a Behavior

As you are happily clicking and treating your appreciative canine, you can at any time change your rules. Say, for example, your dog chooses to flip the box over with a paw and you decide you'd like that to be a trick that he will perform on cue. Your immediate response to that behavior is to click (once) and deliver a *jackpot* - several treats delivered rapid-fire, one-by-one, into his waiting mouth. You're even allowed to gush with praise (normally you just keep your mouth shut and let the clicker do the talking). I personally would stop the session at this point (the phrase "just one more time" is very counterproductive in dog training).

Next session, you should put the box on the floor and begin clicking and treating behaviors, but now clicking with a *goal in mind* - that of tipping over the box. You will now be clicking any behaviors that will build toward that goal: movements toward the box, lifting a paw, touching the edge of the box with the paw, etc. You will ignore any behaviors that are incompatible with this goal: stepping into the box, grabbing it with his mouth, and the like). It's likely that he will figure this out pretty quickly, since your jackpot reinforcement was so enthusiastic. If it doesn't happen at once, no problem - if your clicks are timed well, it will happen!

After several repetitions of placing the box on the floor and the dog going to it immediately and tipping it, you may *add a cue*, i.e., pair the behavior with a word so that the poor little doggie won't have to read your very complicated mind forever, at least as far as this behavior is concerned. It goes like this:

- Dog tips box over - click/treat (C/T)
- Dog tips box over ("Tip it," said as paw pulls box over) (C/T)
- Dog tips box over ("Tip it," said as dog lifts paw toward box) (C/T)
- Dog tips box over ("Tip it," said as dog moves toward box) (C/T)
- "Tip it" said and dog moves toward box and then tips it over (C/T)
- Nothing said. If dog tips box, nothing clicked or treated. (no C/T)
- Dog waits for "Tip it" cue and does his tip it behavior. (C/T)

Each stage in the above progression is reinforced 2 or 3 times before moving the verbal cue toward the beginning. Note that the presence of the box will initially be the dog's cue to tip it over, so the last two steps in the above progression are very important. These steps will make it possible for you to teach the dog to do other things with the box.

Note: Any time you return to training a behavior you were working on in a previous session, go back a step or so from where you left off the previous time. Our goal is for the dog always to be successful.

When and for How Long Should You Train?

Training sessions should be short, just a couple of minutes each (that would be 2 minutes each - time them!). Try to do at least two sessions a day:

- morning and evening
- before his meals
- Between TV commercials
- Etc.

Train one behavior at a sitting. For example, work on un-cued attention at one session, solid sits at another. You might work on attention for 1 minute, take a short break (watch the next part of the TV show; with a 1 minute training session you'll still have time to run for the ice cream) and then work on sits. Through an hour of TV you could have as many as 8 commercial breaks and could train that many behaviors! How many commercial breaks will it take for your dog to be listening for the change in TV sound, and be sitting there, ready to play, when the next commercial comes on?

If you're not training during commercials, or even if you are, an egg timer is a great tool. Set it for a minute or two, and stop when it dings!