



Episode: #05

What Is Shaping and How Can Dogs Shape Us

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Welcome everyone to “Shaped by Dog”. I’m Susan Garrett and today we are going to answer the question: “Susan, what do you mean by shaped by dog? Like what is shaping exactly? And how is it that a dog or dogs can do that for us?”.

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Great question! and by the way, if you have any more questions please don’t hesitate to leave them in the comments on my blog or send them to us at wag@dogsthat.com. Somebody in our customer happiness department will happily forward that on to me.

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Shaping: shaping is one of four ways... I mention, there’s four ways that we can train a dog. We can hope. Just hope that it gets better. We can use primarily punishment to say: “You know what? you better knock that off and you better stop doing that.” We can use lures to get a dog to do what we want, or we can use reinforcement-based, game-based training which is the big overall name is called “shaping”. And shaping is not always game-based that’s the difference in what we do and what maybe a more scientific approach to it is. And in science they call this training your dog by successive approximations. Don’t turn off the podcast please.

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Think of the game... I don’t know if you ever played the game “red-light green-light”. No not that, “the hot and cold” game as a kid. So somebody would hide something in the room and uhm... that you would move in a direction and they would say you’re getting warm, and if you turn the wrong direction they’d say “no you’re cold” and then if you turn back in the right direction they’d say “you’re getting warm”. Great game to play with kids it’s just fun and as you get closer, they’d say you’re getting hot, you’re getting hot, you’re blazing hot and that’s how you’d find something.

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That’s basically shaping! *TADA!* End of Podcast. Not really. That’s what I would call linear shaping. That you reinforce and in a hot cold game you just reinforce by saying you’re getting warm or you’re getting blazing hot! You know that’s really reinforcing to somebody who’s trying to find something. So, in that game, it’s linear as they take a step in that direction, we just say you’re getting closer, closer, closer bingo! you got it! right?

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And that’s the approach that would work in shaping your dog to do something. But, there’s what I call outside the box shaping, which is faster most times, more efficient and it’s more engaging when you do it right so let’s take a... because I’ve said what I’m talking about works no matter if you’re talking about children, or members of your team, or if you run a business. You know people who work with you. It’s all the same... or a sibling or parent or whatever.



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You can alter behavior the same way through shaping. So, let's take an example that would be universal to everybody. Let's take the example - I know this is dog training, but stick with me here. I will get to how this works with dogs. So, let's take an example of you want to teach somebody or inspire your child to sweep the floor. I mean how handy would that be? When a kid grew up wanting to sweep the floor. So, first way of going about it is "hope". So, I'm gonna set good examples, sweep the floor every day and hope someday my kid says, "hey, I really want to sweep the floor too." Yeahhh... How do you think that's gonna work?

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There's a possibility its genetically your child and they're wired the same way you are. It might happen. There's better ways to go about it. Uhm...

The next way is punishment. I need to sweep the floor and if you don't, you're grounded. I need you to sweep the floor. So, think about using intimidation and punishment to get the kid to sweep the floor. I mean they're your kid they'll do it right? But what is it gonna do to the relationship you have with that child and how good a job do you think they're going to do on that floor.

You can say "well I'll punish them and then they'll do a great job." Yeah... you could, but do you think that child is going to grow up thinking: "Wow, when I grow older, I can't wait to sweep my own floor." Probably not.

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And what would they think of you when they grow up? The next way is to "lure". Absolutely, it works great. "Hey! if you sweep the floor, I'll give you a candy, if you sweep the floor I'll give you 25 cents". Eventually it gets old. "You know what? I don't feel like having candy, I'd rather play video games". "No really? not into?". "No you keep your candy, that's good".

But what also happens is you establish a relationship of negotiation with that child.

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So then when you ask them: "Hey uh... can you help your brother with is homework?". "What would you give me?". "Can you go do your teeth?". "Uhh what if I do my teeth uh but then I get to play video games?" Or so its there's... you're establishing with your child the way to get things done through you is through negotiation. That is exhausting. I've seen it happen, it is exhausting as a parent.

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I don't have children of my own let me preface that, but I do have a gajillion nieces and nephews. I should know the right answer, but there's a lot of grand nieces and nephews at this point now too. Uhm... the fourth way "shaping", we could you know have the broom there and give the kid picks it up and you could say: "Oh that's good" or you know you use your clicker and give them a candy and then click when they move it and click when blah blah blah that's just straight linear shaping.

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Here's outside the box thinking shaping. We're going to take the broom and maybe get a little kid sized broom and outside the box in my opinion, it breaks behaviors into components and then it creates a desire around each of those components which come together to create this great behavior.



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So, the first component would be: we want to create value for that broom. Maybe you show that... depending on the age of the child you could show them how you could make it into a horse and gallop around the kitchen. Now, if they're a teenager maybe this isn't gonna be great approach. You know you got to think of it uhm... the way... age appropriate I'm talking let's talk. I don't know 4-6 year old... were gonna play I don't know. I love to play horsey around the kitchen with the broom.

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So now we've created an interaction that this thing is fun. So next time I take like a tennis ball and I'll get a big sized broom and I'll just hit the ball to the child, and they could try to hit it back. So now they're getting that idea of the action of sweeping that broom you know they can go on well do it on both sides to see that they're comfortable making the action of sweeping on both sides.

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Now there's value for picking up that broom, there's fun associated with using the broom. So, then the next session out I might take some painters tape and paint and put a little square on the floor, not a big square maybe twelve inches by twelve inches like little square, and then put like uhm... a dried like a chick pea no a black bean dried bean, a dried bean kidney bean I don't care what kind of bean, outside of the square, not too far outside of the square, and say "See if you can get it in the square", and when the child gets it in the square "That was so awesome!!!" like a big celebration you don't need to give them candy. Just a big celebration.

Oh my gosh games are fun. And then you might move the bean a little further out the square and you make this square.

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You know you might make the square like a meter by a meter like a yard by a yard at first so that there's... if they sweep to hard and it shoots to the other side like if it's too small it's gonna be difficult to do that so. I changed my mind making it a meter a meter it's a big square and so when the child gets it in the square it's a big celebration, and then you might put 2 or three beans outside the square and it might be you know again when they get them in you celebrate and you might like high five them. End the game. And so that you want to end the game when they'll come up "Mom can we play that sweeping game again?"

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You want to create the desire in the child to want to play. Okay well, we'll do it later maybe after homework I don't know we'll see. So, you create an opportunity now we're gonna play this together its bonding it's fun you might put the beans further away from that one meter square. And all the while the child's having fun. Sweeping these beans into the square and then what you might do you is might put you know, eventually you're going to put another square in that square so you know a square that might be like id don't know three or four inches by 3 or four inches and that's the bulls eye. And when we can get the beans in the bulls eye then we'll have a big celebration you know maybe then you will give them a reward of let's have a snack now let's end this and have a snack, or you know let's that was amazing let's go out and just reinforce with an activity. Hey, let's go do something you want to do. How about we play a game of catch now or something that's bonding between you, let's go work on a puzzle.



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Now, we've got a child that has got the desire to want to play the sweeping game and they want to get into the small little pile. Does that sound close to what sweeping a floor would be like? So, you progress to, you put more beans on the floor and put them in further areas of the room. So that they can have success sweeping a big area. Now if you got a gargantuan kitchen just make it half the kitchen for the kid at first and then end the game, that's it, let's go do something fun. So that you are establishing, "sweeping is fun", "doing something easy was fun", and then we get the reward after doing something else.

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That is using outside the box thinking and shaping to create behavior. And it creates lasting behavior that the behavior itself becomes motivational to do. And you may get a child that went through the time they were four to ten or twelve they may enjoy sweeping the floor. I'm not promising it's gonna hold up through the teen years, I got no magic pill. However, I know it will hold up far better than anything else you could ever hope to use to teach a child how to do something.

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Alright. The exact same thing works for dogs. So, you get the dog to hold a broom, just kidding! Haha! not gonna teach a dog to sweep a floor. It works the same because you break things down into a components that the dog loves. They think it's fun to do. And then you build the confidence that they can do it and then you put those components into bigger things.

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So, let me explain, I was teaching a seminar and I had one of my little Jack Russell there and this was many years ago. And I said, "you guys pick something you would like me to shape her to do". And they wanted me to shape her to jump up on something that has slippery surface and I said "alright, now you tell me how I'm gonna do it". Of course, it was linear shaping. They wanted me to click a reward when she looked at whatever it is I wanted her to jump on. And then click a reward when she took a step towards it, click a reward when she took another step, and click a reward when she put her paws on the top, and click a reward when she jumped up and that would be behavior. That would be linear shaping. I knew with that dog it wouldn't work.

And the reason I knew it wouldn't work because the floor was slippery, and she was a little bit worried about slipping she would not jump of the slippery floor. And the top of the thing they wanted her to jump on was slippery and I just knew she wouldn't do it.

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So, I said "I'll see what happens". "We'll go through this, but I promise you there will come a point it will become obvious, she won't wanna do this". So, she got all the way to putting her paws up, and then when I click her two or three times for putting her paws up and then I didn't reward her after the third time of getting a cookie, she then started sniffing and going on a circle because she did not want to jump up. What I did was, I put a carpet runner on the floor, I took the top of the table and I lowered it, and I put another carpet runner on there and just rewarded her for jumping on it then put it up there, boom! she jumped up. It took three seconds when I did it the way I knew, outside the box thinking would work versus the linear which I never got the behavior that took about three minutes for that session.



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So that is how we shape a dog. We reinforce responses that they give us that lead us towards the end behavior that we want. Now, this might be a bit of a mind blow because I don't know how I would get my dog to bring back the ball if they could go and jump on the couch, there's a lot more to it. I'll share with you the rules or the guidelines that help make shaping efficient, things like altering the environment. So, if I wanted to shape my dog to retrieve something, I wouldn't try to do it outside where they can go run and visit other dogs or pee on a bush, I would do it in my bathroom, I call it "crapper" training. I love crapper training because it eliminates other options, what are they gonna do? They can sniff the toilet, that's it. And then I have a disengaged captured audience, crapper training, gotta love it.

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"How then, and now I know that how shaping works Susan, your podcast is called 'Shaped by Dog', how do dogs shape us?". Now, there's the obvious, any of you who ever own a dog and have been asleep and heard that dog start to throw up on your nice white carpet in your bedroom, you will spring out of bed faster than any alarm clock could ever get you out of bed, you will hurry and try to get that dog off of your carpet so that they can throw up somewhere where it can be cleaned up or maybe you wanna get them outside so don't have to clean it up at all. And you got reinforced for that behavior of springing out of bed by not having a stain on your carpet or by not having to clean the dog, clean up the vomit, if you can get them outside. That's how pretty simple way how dogs can shape our behavior. It is not like dogs are strategizing, "watch me, watch how I get her out of bed". They shape us by helping us be better version of ourselves.

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So, for example, my very first dog I ever trained was, one of my sisters used to show dogs in confirmation, like Westminster, that kind of confirmation, and I wanted to teach this dog a trick. And so, I bought the book, at the time I really wanted a Chow Chow, I think I was thirteen, I bought the book of How to Raise and Train Your Chow Chow. And it was, 'use a choke collar and you correct the dog', and that's how the learning happened. That was my early understanding of how to train a dog. You told them to do something, you pushed up or pulled up in their collar, pushed down in their bum when you wanted them to sit and then you gave them a pat on the head, there was no food or toys involved, it was just correction and pat them on the head. It was number two on the ways of training a dog.

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I got a job as a teenager on a farm and they wanted me to train this little Rough Collie. Now in between those two dogs, we had family pets and I train them to do a lot of tricks. So, with this Rough Collie I tried to do the sit, with the way 'How to Raise and Train Your Chow Chow' told me and this Rough Collie will just roll over and pee on herself. Now, I don't know what she is doing, and I don't like that. And so, she shaped me to take a different approach because I was having zero after a week, I had no success. So, I'm like "well I know how to train a trick, what if I tried to teach you to sit just by rewarding you with food?" Boom! In three minutes, I was able to do way more than I could have done in the last week.

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I was shaped by dog. The dog responses shaped us to take a different approach. If you're open to that, and that's why I believe that we can become a better version of ourselves. The version we're intended to be... by being open to the lessons that our dogs are teaching us. But you need to have that



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openness. You need to be present for the dog but sadly.. what happens a lot of times is, there's the excitement of getting a new puppy and they get all this attention, and once they've stop chewing your furniture and peeing on the floor, they kind of become, sadly in a lot of homes, like a piece of furniture. Like " you know, I ignored that couch during the week 'cause I'm busy at work and I got things to do at night but comes Sunday afternoon and I'm gonna stretch on that couch and I'm gonna have a great relationship with you and gonna watch some football". And sadly that's the way relationship with dogs sometimes get, is "I'm too busy, you're trained, you're not bothering me that's good, and maybe on the second Friday of the month, it's a beautiful day I'm gonna take you for a nice long walk".

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Hopefully that's not the way your dog lives. Hopefully your dog gets engagement and long walks from you every single day of their life, rain or shine. I used to be one of the people that wasn't open to what my dog was trying to teach me, and they didn't get walks every day. And I'm happy to say I have evolved because I have been shaped by dogs to be present for all the things they can bring to me when I spend time and create this amazing relationship that I have with them on our, yes they get walked at least an hour most days two hours a day.

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That is how dogs have shaped my life and I'm really hoping that you could think of ways that your dog has shaped your life. Now, sometimes dogs shape your life by raiding the garbage so every time you go out you pick up the garbage and you put it on the counter. That's a behavior you wouldn't have done if hadn't had a dog, right? Haha! Just proved to you dogs indeed have shaped your life. That's it for today, tune in tomorrow and please if you haven't subscribed please hit the subscribe button so that you can be notified every time I have a new episode of 'Shaped by Dog' and please share this with your friends. See you next time.

Resources

[Positive Dog Training and the Difference in Shaping](#)

[Who's Shaping Who?](#)



About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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