

Target Training For Dogs: How, Why, And When To Fade Targets

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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SG If you've been following my most [recent podcast episodes](#) you will know I'm talking about how we train dogs. How I train my own dogs and how I train my students' dogs. And one of the big part of that training is the use of targets. And that prompted a question from many of you and I'm going to answer it tonight.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. The question that people ask when - I say I don't use food lures, I use targets - I get asked, "Well, how do you fade the targets?" And I realize that may not be innate. And so, I'm going to do a deep dive into that in this podcast episode. I'm gonna include things like what is and isn't a true target. Why targets work so darn well.

I'm going to share with you the three questions I would strongly recommend you ask yourself before you attempt to fade a target. And of course, I'm gonna teach you how I fade targets. So, let's get started. First of all, what's the difference between a food lure and a target?

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"Well Susan, let's say I want my dog to heel. I'll put a cookie right on my hip and he learns that's a position that I want him to heel at. Or if I want him to do a dog walk contact in agility, I'll take a little margarine lid and I'll put a cookie on that, and he knows to go right to that margarine lid. Or if I wanted him to like spin, I would just put a cookie on his nose and put it in a little circle and pretty quickly he would follow that cookie."

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So those are not targets. Those are lures. The difference between a target and a lure is the lure is the dog's ultimate reinforcement. So, a primary reinforcement like food makes a great lure if the dog wants the food that you're luring with. Also, a secondary reinforcer that the dog absolutely loves but it's a secondary reinforcer because they've learned to love it. Like dogs who might be crazy about a tennis ball.

Now, why are those lures and not targets? Because the power, the value that the dog has for the food, or the toy will overshadow the actual target that you're trying to get the dog to notice there. Because once they grab that food or they grab that ball, then that's it for them. They've got their value.

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And so, a target represents like a shop, the store's open sign. A target tells the dog when you get to this location or when you follow this thing the opportunity to earn something you really, really want is in play. So, a target is more like a 'Okay, game on. We can start now.' 'You see that? We're_ it's in game. Let's go.' 'You can earn that which you like.'

So, you see the difference between the two. If you would like to know more about how I actually use the targets, I would strongly recommend you come over to YouTube and you check out a two-part series I've done on all the [different targets](#) that you might want to use when you train the way that we're doing.



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And I'll give you a actual game plan, a [lesson plan](#) of how I use a target in training. It's I think it's 30 minutes of pure dog training over on YouTube. So, check that out. I'll put a [link in the show notes](#) for that.

So why do targets work so darn well? Because it starts off with what the dog loves. So, if your dog's crazy about food then that's a good thing that you're gonna start with. Or if they're crazy about toys you can use that as well.

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But that's what the dog loves and we are going to condition something else. If you've ever used a clicker with your dog and the dog, when you click the clicker, the dog goes "Hmm? Yeah? I'm in." You've properly conditioned the dog to understand that the clicker represents the opportunity to earn reinforcement.

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Now, a target is very similar in that you condition the dog to know this is of great value. We start with something the dog really likes. We transfer that to something like a target stick or a paw target or a position like be in this bed. We transfer it to a target. So, most of the things that we do involves that transfer of value from the ultimate reward to something a secondary reinforcer. It could be a toy. It could be a target.

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And then that ultimately goes into what it is that we want. What is it that you want? You want your dog to walk on a loose leash. Or you want your dog— if you're doing something like competition obedience or field work to run away in a straight line, you could use targets for those activities.

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Basically, you can use targets for just about anything. Tricks - amazing for using targets. Okay. Jump over to that series of YouTube videos to learn more about what you can do with the target. But now you see it is a conditioning exercise that creates the dog going "Oh, I see a target. Stores open. That means the opportunity for me to work and earn reinforcement is on."

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And that only happens if you have properly conditioned it AKA you don't put cookies on the target. Because the power of the cookie actually blocks the dog from getting any salient value through to that target. Okay. Super important that you condition the target correctly. Alright.

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And that's why targets work so well because I could pull out any number of targets with any of my dogs including my 17-week-old puppy or my rescue Bulldog mix. And when they see a target, they go "Oh yeah, this is exciting! This is exciting!"

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It's just like as if you know, you put on your bait bag and your dog gets super excited. Our dogs get super excited when they see any of these targets because it represents a chance to earn reinforcement. Now, if you're just using lures, you're trying to create these behaviors, what happens is the value stays with the lure or with you.



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So, the dog won't want to move too far away if you're trying to get them to do something in a distance because the value is always with you, it's either in your bait bag or it's coming from your hand. So, it gets a little more difficult to create more complex behaviors with these dogs. Not impossible and I'm not dishing luring guys. There are reasons - more reasons - why I don't use food lures - I'll get to that in upcoming episodes. But I'm just telling you what are some of the limitations and why the opportunities for like more complex behaviors grow when you are using targets in your training.

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Okay. So, what are those three questions that I talked about? When you are thinking "Alright. I've got my targeted behavior. I want to get rid of this thing that I've been using as a target. Whether you know, I'm using a stick to get my dog to spin or I'm using you know, a target for my dog to put their paws up on. How do I fade that, so I just have this great behavior?"

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Two things I want you to know up front. Number one, the experience of the dog in using targets absolutely is going to impact how quickly you can fade the target. And so, with my dogs who've been raised with targets from the time they were puppies, I could put anything down in a spot, give them a few rewards for it, get rid of it, and my dogs would go to that spot immediately because they're target savvy.

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Your dogs will get target savvy and it won't take long because as I mentioned, my 17-week-old puppy is very target savvy. So that is going to influence how you fade or when you can fade. Also of course, the experience of you.

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So, I've been doing this for 30 years. I'm really experienced in fading targets, but you will get there. It might not be as seamless, but it will happen because I'm gonna give you the plan today. Alright, three questions you're going to ask yourself before you start to fade a target. Number one, did you condition the target properly AKA did you use food or toys on the target at first in order to get the dog to do something?

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Now, if you used it a couple of times and then you got rid of it then it's probably not going to hurt anything. But if you find yourself "Oh, the dog's not seeing value on my target. I'm gonna put a couple more cookies on there." then that is a slippery slope my friend. Which is why I just recommend you don't ever put food on a target. Do not bait targets.

So, if you did or if you're still doing it, it's going to be really difficult to lose that target because the dog doesn't really understand the target because it's been overshadowed by the food on the target. Makes sense, right?

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So, did you condition it properly or were you relying on food lures? Now the second question is, [are you helping the dog](#) with your own prompts? Like if you wanted the dog to put their paws on something are you saying, "Come on! Atta boy! Get going. That's okay." Or giving them, you know, a word that means "Go, go put your paws up." or you know, whatever it is.



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Are you helping or is the dog just saying, "Oh, there's a target! Yeah! I'm going to it!" as if they were running to a big old meatball. Okay. So, question number two is does your dog have DASH? As I spoke about in podcast— well I spoke about it in many podcasts including podcast [episode number 144](#) - the desire, the accuracy, the speed, the habitat.

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If the dog has DASH, then they are going to see that target and just run to it. So, number one, has it been conditioned properly? Number two, does the dog have DASH? Which means you don't have to help the dog perform the targeted behavior that you want them to perform. Question number three, what will be replacing the target?

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Okay, because if you want a dog to do something, what is replacing it? Now in the case of a trick like getting a dog to spin, we're gonna fade that target out to nothing. So, what replaces it, just a verbal cue. If it was something like, "I want my dog just to lie in the kitchen. I'm gonna start with a dog bed but I don't want a dog bed in my kitchen. I just want them to lie in the kitchen."

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Well, that is really vague. So vague criteria means you end up with really weak behavior. But you could say, "I want my dog to lie with their back against this wall." or "I want my dog always to lie under this chair." Those are targeted behaviors that you can replace your dog bed with. But you've got to be thinking forward in what is that finished product? "I want my dog—" like you might use a [target stick to help teach your dog to walk by your side](#) or work on heel position.

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What is it that you want? I want a location. I want - that location will involve my dogs. If I'm doing competition obedience it might involve where my dog places their head, how far away from it they are— et cetera, et cetera.

So, before you fade the target ask yourself, what will replace the target? What is it that my dog will know that this means 'boom, do that'? Okay. So, three simple questions. Have I conditioned it? Do I have DASH, meaning am I not helping? And what will replace the target?

Okay. Let's get to fade targets now. Before we jump into how to get rid of those targets, I do want to mention cues.

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Let's say I'm teaching my dog to spin. Now, do I give the cue to spin when the target is still in play, or do I fade the target and add the cue when the dog can perform without the target? That's a great question. And the easy answer is it's always best to create the behavior and then add the cue.

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So, something simple like getting a dog to spin. Definitely I'd like all the props faded so that the dog is just offering the behavior and then add the cue. There are times though when I will add the cue while the target is still present and those are generally behaviors that are going to take longer to train a dog to do. Like when we're trying to change or create a fixed action pattern for the dog meaning the way that they go about doing things.



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In agility we have something called a running contact that I will keep the target in play longer because there's more of a chance of the dog not being able to reproduce the behavior. And so that would be the only time and even then, you might even change the cue because if you add a cue too early you may actually be bringing in artifacts of unlearned behaviors or improper behaviors or slow behaviors. So always good to err on the side of "do I really need the cue right now or can I wait until I really have faded my props?"

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Okay. So, step number one in fading the target. We want to minimize the target and there's a few ways that you can do it depending on the target that you're using. Number one if you're doing something with the dog's paws, you might minimize that target by decreasing the height of the target. So, if you've got something that's you know several inches tall you keep going down by halves until it's quite small.

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So, decreasing the height. The second thing you could do is decrease the size. So, if I'm using a big whiffle ball on a stick as a target, I can go to a smaller whiffle ball on a stick or a smaller target stick. You want to minimize the size. So, it's becoming less obvious to the dog that there's a target there. You can also consider the color of your target.

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So, whenever I'm going to use a target, say a paw target for my dog, I always pull out my [dog vision app](#) and my dog vision gives an approximation of what our dogs see. So, when I'm first introducing a target, I want great contrast with whatever flooring is underneath. So, I'll pull up my dog vision and I'll take the color of target that gives me the best contrast to make it super obvious for my dog.

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When I'm fading the target though, I want one that blends in with the floor so that I'm starting to help my dog to see 'this is what it looks like when nothing's here'. So, I've lowered the size of the target, or I've made the target smaller, or I've changed the color so that it blends into the background.

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Another thing that you can do, and this is a great one for like heel position. I'll do this one when I'm working on my dog sidestepping. So, I want my dog to take lateral steps in front of me. It's a fitness exercise and I start by using 2x4s as paw targets, one in front, one in behind.

So, what you can do is you can have them sidestep and when they get really good at doing it on a target you could have them sidestep off, say one step off the 2x4s and then back on. And then maybe two steps off the 2x4s and then back on. Or I'll have a set of 2x4s to the left and a set to the right. And there might be like two steps in between.

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So, we go off of these 2x4s a couple of steps in freedom, in no man land and then back up onto the next step. So, presenting and removing and presenting. So, if I wanted to get like a head position on my dog if I was doing competition obedience, I might have the target in there and what I would be doing is clicking the dog when they're not touching. I might teach that head position with them touching the target but very quickly early on I don't want heel position to be associated with touching.



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So here in North America and unlike in Europe we get points off if our dog is touching. So, if we're using nose targets then when something's faded and the dog's stress, they're gonna go back to what they first learned which is touching. So, they might start bumping your leg. Alright. And so, what I'll do is I'll be clicking the nose target when they're not quite touching but they're getting close.

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And so, when it's time for me to remove that target, I might click one, move it up a little bit higher, then click another, move it back down lower, click and then put it out behind my back, click and bring it back. So, it's back and forth and back and forth. That is how you can fade your target. Now, the way you fade your target is completely dependent upon the type of target that you're using and the behavior you're creating.

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For example, back to teaching spin with a target stick. What I might do when I'm first— I'm just getting the dog comfortable with going in a position— And again, this is one where I might start by having them touch the target once or twice, but I really want them just to follow the target stick and not get their nose on it.

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I want to move that target stick, so they don't get a chance to get their nose on it because I don't want them to know that spin involves touching me in any way. Alright. So, I'll get them moving and following that target stick in both directions. And then I might choke up on the target stick. So, it's really kind of like my hand.

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And then you can go to just your hand and then what you can do is prompt a little bit with your hand and click the motion to start. And your placement of reinforcement is going to get that dog maybe doing a quarter of the circle, one back and use part of your target stick. So, the goal of fading a target stick what you really are doing is fading the presence of a prompt that creates the behavior. That is all you're doing.

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And so, there is no right or wrong way to do it provided you're not baiting your targets. What it is, is you want to make sure your dog has clarity and doesn't get frustrated. If your dog is getting frustrated— this is a big mistake that many people will make.

They fade their target. They're waiting for the dog to offer the behavior. The dog doesn't do it. And so, the dog may go partway and stop. And then the owner will say, "No, go spin." And the dog goes "Oh, okay," and go partway and stop. "No spin, go spin, go spin."

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So, if you keep repeating your cue what you're doing is you're diluting the effectiveness of the cue and you're actually rewarding the dog for stopping by repeating the cue. So, here's the golden rule. Believe the dog. Always, always believe the dog.

So, I give my dogs time to work things out. If I give a prompt and they go part way and I click and reward. If they don't go part way, I might give them a second to figure it out, but I believe them.



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"If you truly don't understand what it is I want, then I have faded that target way too early. So, I'll just go back and do it again." I'll give you an example. Somebody in one of our online classrooms introduced a dog bed in their kitchen. They wanted their dog to lie in the kitchen and after a couple of days of that they removed the dog bed, and they expected the dog to lie in that spot.

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And that just isn't long enough. I've had a dog bed in the same location in my kitchen for years. Now, my dogs will get reinforcement for staying out of the kitchen and staying on that dog bed. So, every dog in the household has had reinforcement on that dog bed.

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I'd be willing to bet if I remove that dog bed tomorrow there would be dogs just lying on that spot because it represented so much reinforcement. So, when in doubt keep the target in a little bit longer provided your target isn't baited.

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If you have any questions and I would love to hear from you, come on over to YouTube, leave them in the comment sections. And I've told you this before but let me just share with you why, there's a lot of dog training out there. More and more people are sharing their dog training knowledge online. But just between us girls, okay and us guys, there's a lot of dog trainers that are sharing information that could get dogs hurt.

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And so, for YouTube to share this podcast with as many people as possible it's going to take people like you coming over, hitting the subscribe button so you're telling the algorithm "This is pretty good stuff. This lady kind of knows what she's talking about." So please help me help others by becoming a subscriber to our YouTube page.

I'll see you over there. Thank you and I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 171: Dog Training With Layered Shaping: Why Classical Conditioning Must Come First](#)

[YouTube Video: Target Stick Training for Dogs Part 1](#)

[YouTube Video: Target Stick Training for Dogs Part 2](#)

[Podcast Episode 12: When Helping Your Dog is an Illusion](#)

[Podcast Episode 144: Teach Your Dog To Listen No Matter What... Even If You Think They Are Stubborn](#)

[YouTube Video: Help for Loose Leash Walking: Create Value for Your Dog Walking with You Using a Target Stick](#)

[Apple iOS App "Dog Vision HD " by Laan labs](#)

[Android App Dog vision](#)



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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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