

Use These Simple Shaping Hacks To Expedite Your Dog Training

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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What if I told you no matter where you were today in your dog training, no matter if you're brand new to all of this, or you've been doing it for a while but you're still struggling, or you're actually pretty darn good.

No matter where you are today with one small change, you could be on the fast track, exponentially improving what you've got to a completely different level of understanding between you and your dog. Sounds too good to be true I know, but stick with me today because that's what I have planned.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And today, I am going to be talking about shaping and why I believe this is the one small shift that you can make that will put you and your dog on the fast track to learning.

Listen, when I started dog training, I used a lot of lures in my training, like probably many of you listening to this. And in 1992, I was doing a lot of shaping behavior, but still luring to start or adding lures when I felt the situation needed it or the dog required it. All of that started changing. But 1993, I really started phasing things out. And when my dog Buzz came around in 1996, I was doing nothing but shaping for every behavior that I was teaching him.

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Now listen, if you listen to [podcast episode number five](#), and I think it's one of the most important episodes of all the episodes that I've put out here for you. If you listen to podcast episode number five, go back and relisten to it.

Because I want you to know there's a difference between shaping or free shaping what people call, like what I might call sometimes 'navel gazing', just waiting for the dog to offer a behavior so that you could you know, tell them that was good and reinforce them, maybe click a clicker and reinforce them, and then wait for them to offer something else that was deemed spectacular.

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There's a big difference between what I identified in that episode as 'linear shaping', where it's behavior one, then two, then three, and 'outside the box shaping'. Well, today I want to talk more about outside the box shaping, and I want to make it more accessible to everybody who listens to this podcast.

I'm going to share a little secret with you. I mentioned that I really started phasing out all luring and it was almost all gone by 1993. Well, in 2023, 30 years later, I decided to try luring again. I did with my most recent [puppy Prophet](#).

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I decided I was going to pick three behaviors that I would do a combination of [targeting](#) and luring. Something that I affectionately referred to as "Targ-luring." Now how I accomplished that is he had a great nose target where he would nose target my hand with his nose and I would hide a cookie in my thumb. And I would use that as both a target and of course with the cookie being there, not accessible, he had a great [ItsYerChoice](#). He would never try and steal it, but he would follow that hand.



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Three different behaviors that I chose to pick. Now what I learned from that is the behaviors happened so fast. But the behaviors were attached to both the food lure and the hand target. So, it was painstakingly slow for me to get understanding from the dog. For the dog to generalize those three behaviors without at least a little bit of a lure.

And so, it was fun going back down memory lane and saying, "Hey, are there things we really should be luring with?" And honestly, I truly believe that even with the advancements that people have and the sophistication they're able to lure, if you're not shaping, you're losing out on a great opportunity to bring understanding to your dog.

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And I want to make sure that you have clarity with how you set up the environment for shaping before you begin. So, if I believe shaping really works this well, then why did the majority of [dog trainers still use](#) lures in their training? And I believe there's a number of reasons.

Number one is change is hard. Change requires people stepping outside of their comfort zone. And the truth is dog training, if you stick with it long enough, if you're persistent, it will work extremely well because dogs deep down inside, they're just driven to want to work with us.

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And so, they say, "If it's not broke, why try to fix it?" And they don't want the change. They are change averse. Number two, it's peer pressure. Because if you're training in a group where everybody just goes to a lure, then you're going to be looked at awkwardly.

And Lord help you if in that learning curve of you trying to get a grasp of shaping, your dog fails at something in the midst of your peers that are luring everything, then you will be ridiculed and not everybody's built to deal with that kind of peer pressure. So, let's just do what everybody else in the group is doing.

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Number three, it could be that there's a lack of belief in the possibility that shaping will work for all dogs or that shaping could work with all types of trainers or handlers. Number four, there very likely is a lack of belief in what's possible for the dog, either the breed of dog or the situation, the history, it's a rescue dog, or there's some deep-seated belief about the dog that the [handler's belief](#) holds that dog back from actually reaching potential that they didn't even know existed.

And number five, people say, "Oh yeah, I tried that shaping. It just doesn't work for me. It doesn't work for my dog. You know, I believe dogs can learn from different methods." And here's the thing. Shaping isn't a method. Shaping is how all animals learn. You know, it doesn't matter if it's a parrot or a cat or a puppy, an older dog, all animals learn through shaping.

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It's the laws of learning. It's ABC. It's the [antecedent, behavior, consequence](#) that I spoke about in podcast [episode number 245](#). It's the 'thing before the thing' that I talked about in [episode number 16](#).

You know, [when Tater Salad first came here](#), he was what you would call a street savvy dog. Not that he lived on the streets, but that he learned by his wits of the ABCs of life in his home. So, here's one little game that he would play when he arrived here. If all the dogs were given bones to chew on and Tater Salad of course would have his, but he wouldn't just want his, right?



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He would want everybody's bone. So, he learned very quickly. If he left his bone, went to the front door, and started barking like on high alert, all the Border Collies would leave their bones. And of course, he would just go back in and pick them up.

Antecedent, behavior, consequence. So, the behavior is all of the dogs leave their bones. The consequence is Tater Salad gets the choice of bones. And the antecedent to get the behavior is, "What if I just start barking at nothing?"

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It's a game he still tries. Some of the dogs are kind of savvy to it now. They might go running with the bone in their mouth, but it doesn't stop him from trying. It's how all animals learn. And it's how I've been successful for more than [35 years as a professional dog trainer](#). It's how I teach every agility skill my dogs learn.

If I'm coaching somebody by breaking things down and shaping their behavior, it really helps them learn the skills that I'm trying to teach. So, if you've tried shaping and you struggled with it, or you've never tried it because it's a little bit of an unknown, mystical thing, let's dig into the ABCs of shaping, what exactly it looks like, but I still want you to go back and review podcast episode number five.

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So, the first thing I like to discuss when discussing shaping is the C, the consequence. Now behaviors can only grow if the behavior is followed up with something that the dog really, really likes. The consequence when we're shaping is reinforcement. So, you need to really understand what reinforces your dog.

And you're in luck because if you jump over to my YouTube channel, we have [an entire playlist](#) all about how to identify and how to grow the things that are reinforcing to your dog. And you can't just say, "Well, my dog likes everything.", because there'll be a hierarchy and I'll talk all about it in those podcast episodes in the playlist. We'll leave a link in the show notes if you're listening to this episode so that you can go back and listen to this playlist.

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The reinforcement and the hierarchy of reinforcement is critical when you're shaping behavior. Because if you have a dog who, you know they take food sometimes but they're not really that keen, I promise you, you will struggle with shaping behavior.

If you have a dog that they'll take a food reward or maybe a toy reward or you know, they'll take reinforcement occasionally but they're not really consistent or keen on much of anything. Then I promise you, you will struggle teaching that dog anything because the ABCs, the behavior grows because of the consequence.

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And so, your first task is going to be [growing that reinforcement](#). It could be something as simple as like, you know your dog goes crazy when you come home from work, that they're really excited to see you.

So, that would be the time when you get into the house, give them a piece of cheese, and then go crazy. "Yeah, that was awesome." And after about two or three days of this, the piece of cheese is going to take on the value of the excitement of you going home.



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You might then add giving them a piece of cheese, walk into the house a little bit, give them another piece of cheese, and grow different reinforcements by picking on times when the dog is really excited or keen to do something.

That is before we can use operant conditioning, which is what shaping is, we need to do [classical conditioning](#). We need to condition the dog's love for the consequences that we can use for shaping. I hope that makes sense.

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Alright, now we're going to go to the B, the behavior. Now, this is super important. Let's say that we would like our dog to pose to get a picture taken. So recently in our community Wag Nation, I did a little demonstration of how you can teach your dog [the trick selfie](#) where the dog will pose on your shoulders.

Now let's say you want, you're out walking, you wanted your dog to pose on a log or to pose in front of you know, a building, or to maybe pose in some cute way with their paws up on your couch. So, that could be a behavior. Let's shape that behavior. But here's the critical point about shaping. You don't just go, "Oh, I want this behavior. I want the dog posing on these things." You have to split that behavior down into smaller pieces.

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And remember, as I mentioned in episode number five, we want to split that outside of the box of shaping. And what I mean by that is you might make it really difficult for yourself and say, "Okay. Well, I want my dog's paws up on the couch. And so, I might lure them up on the couch and say, "stay, stay, stay." And the dog's going to get off the couch and it's going to be, "Oh, get back up there."

No. You might say, "Okay Susan, I'm going to use a target stick. I'm going to get [a clicker](#) and I'm going to hold the target stick above the couch. And when the dog touches the target stick, I'm going to click it and have a cookie near the couch. And I'm going to keep doing that until he wants to put his paws up on the couch."

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Making way too much work for yourself. That is linear shaping. We want outside the box shaping. So, here's a simple, easy way you can do this. And I talked about this in [my YouTube video on Target Training](#). Take a big blanket and you're going to put a blanket on the floor and you're going to give your dog the cue 'search' and toss a cookie away from the blanket.

So, the blanket's opened up really big, but we're throwing the cookie off the blanket. Why? Because when the dog eats the cookie, they're going to come back to you. When the dog comes back to you, you're going to say "search" and throw another cookie off the blanket. You might do that, three or four times until the dog says, "Well, those cookies are great over there. I'm going to come back here really quick."

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Alright, they're coming back on the blanket really quick. Now we're going to say "cook", and we're going to feed them a cookie in their mouth. And then we're going to say "search" and throw a cookie off. Very quickly, the dog's going to be driving back to the blanket. If you were standing on the blanket, now you're going to get off that blanket. After a few more repetitions, you're going to fold that blanket in half.



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Then you're going to fold it in half again. And before you know it, you have a little square of a blanket. That my friend is a target because I promise you, your dog will be coming in and standing on it with their paws. You could put the cue 'pose' with that blanket.

Now let's put it on a footstool. Let's put it on your couch. Now let's get rid of that blanket and take like a little towel. Put it on the footstool or on the couch. And now we've got the cue 'pose' and our little towel. Let's get rid of that towel. Just say "pose" and point.

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I use the cue 'paws up' for this. Anytime I point to something, and I say "paws up" because of my blanket training, my dogs know, "Okay, I got this. I can put my paws up on that stump out in the field to take a beautiful portrait." "Oh yeah, I can put my paws up on your shoulder to be part of the selfie trick." Do you see the behavior gets split down and the shaping is easy for the dog to figure out.

It isn't belly button gazing. It's just one thing happening after another. Now, when you are picking that behavior, I'm going to give you a little bit of a hint. If your dog is frantic and going, "Okay, let's go, let's go. What are we doing? What are we doing? What are you doing?" Your first behavior you might shape your dog to do is just be still.

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So, maybe it might be just lay in a bed until you give a release cue. That could be anytime you start shaping with that dog, we just want to [shape calm](#). Now you can think, now we can move forward. And don't be afraid to break it off and go back and shape some more calm if you feel they're getting a little edgy in their training.

Now, if you have the opposite, you have a dog who they're just not as motivated, then you're going to be sure to shape something that's a little bit more action. Something like Target Training with their paws or what we call the Vito Game, where you might put an empty dog dish on either side of you as you sit on the floor.

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Tap one bowl, the dog comes over there, drop a cookie in that. And then when the dog eats the cookie, tap the other bowl, put a cookie in there. Before you know it, you're just dropping cookies as the dog goes back and forth. They're offering behavior.

Most important though, guys, is we need to be sure that the initial behaviors that we're training are things that are suited to the personality of the dog. A little bit more active dog, let's shape some calm. Dog that needs some get up and go, let's shape some activity.

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Okay so, that's the behavior and that's the splitting. Now the antecedent arrangement. So, the antecedent arrangements are all the things that might give the dog hints in the future that this is the behavior you should be offering.

And so, in order to do that, you need to minimize any environmental distractions. So, if I was teaching a dog to retrieve, let's say I wanted to teach a dog to retrieve a pen. I wouldn't like, go into my living room where there's dog toys and dog bones and balls and put a pen in the middle of that and just sit back with some cookies and wait for something to happen.



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Because that is presenting so many choices for the dog. That they're going to get frustrated and [frustrated dogs](#) either get more frantic and try harder or they get more despondent and give up. And so, we want to create antecedent arrangements that makes the correct choice the obvious choice for the dog.

So, if I wanted to shape my dog to pick up a pen, I probably wouldn't start with a pen. I'd start with things that were more interesting for a dog to pick up, like maybe a tug toy. [Tug with them](#), put my hand out for them to touch my hand with the tug toy in their mouth and I'd grab it. And then I put the tug toy on the ground, they'd pick it up and I could put a cue on that.

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Alright so, outside the box shaping, ABC. You know, back in 2018, I wrote a blog post, it was before I was doing the podcast. And I wrote a blog post with [six tips on successful shaping](#). When I sat down to write this podcast episode, a friend of mine said, "Why don't you go back and refer to that one? Go back to 2018 and what did you say then?"

And lo and behold, the first three things I said on that list of seven were, make sure the reinforcement is something they want. Remember, consequence. The first thing I talked about today. The second thing I spoke about in that blog post was the behavior. Make sure you are splitting it down to small pieces. The B, I spoke about that second today.

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And the third thing I spoke about is the environment. Make sure that you don't overwhelm the dog. Make sure that you do the training in an environment that is easy for the dog to be successful. So, the same three key things are still the same three key things. You want to see the other four things I mentioned about how to have successful shaping.

I'll leave a link in the show notes so that you can go and read that blog post as well. But before I stop, I'm going to give you a cheat code. I want to give you a cheat code of how to hedge your bets to make sure your next or first shaping session is the best one yet. In that, I think that there's a few things if you have in place before you start shaping, it'll make things a lot easier.

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So, number one, I've mentioned it, and that is a hierarchy of reinforcements. Things that the dog really, really likes. Number two, is at least these two [location specific reinforcer markers](#). The cue 'cook,' which tells the dog 'I'm delivering the food to your mouth.' And the cue 'search,' which tells the dog to 'Look off to the floor where I've thrown the food, and you can have the food from that.'

Now, if you've followed my podcast, you know, I use a lot more location specific reinforcement markers, but those two will get you started, and you'll have amazing time with it. Number three in the cheat code is make sure you teach your dog ItsYerChoice.

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So, if you were the dog that we wanted to get more excited about offering behavior, and I told you sit on the floor with dog dishes on either side and you're holding cookies and your dog didn't know ItsYerChoice, they would ignore the dog dishes all day long. They would just be trying to mug you for the food in your hands. So, ItsYerChoice I think is just paramount for teaching or shaping any behavior, so the dog knows, "Hey, I've got to earn it. I can't just steal it."



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So, ItsYerChoice, super important game. All these things, guys, there'll be a link in the show notes for you so that you will know how to teach them to your dog. Number four, [Crate Games](#) or Hot Zone. So, I love Crate Games or Hot Zone because it's really the first kind of shaping.

I myself start with Crate Games and then I go to Hot Zone, but it gives our dogs a starting place when we're shaping. And if we want to adjust something, we just tell our dogs to 'hop it up' and then we readjust, and then we can get back and release them from the Hot Zone or the Crate Games and back into shaping.

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Then finally, if you're shaping something that's duration, like spend time in the Hot Zone until, you really need a release cue. And that I teach my dogs from Crate Games. So, it's kind of you know, they're related.

Okay, I want to share with you a couple of the final keys that were in that original blog post, because I think they're too important to leave off this episode. Point number five, keep those sessions super, super short. And they begin with a one-minute evaluation. So, you set a timer. You start your shaping session.

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Now for me, I often end before the one-minute timer goes off because I know there's things I want to change. You put your dog up in the hot zone or in their crate after one minute, and then you look out, were things really going well? Was the dog really understanding?

And if so, well, let's change things around and challenge the dog more. But for me, if you're like me it's, "Oh, you weren't handling things the right way. The things weren't clear enough. Let's change the environment and make it easier for the dog to be successful."

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Number six, DASH. I've spoken about [DASH on this podcast](#). We need a dog to have desire before we try to teach them the accuracy of any behavior. So, D - desire, A - accuracy, S - speed, and H - habitat. [Generalize that behavior](#) all over your home before you think the dog is really getting this understanding.

Number seven, super important, have a plan. You can't just jump in and shape something without a plan. Because what's the old saying go? Like 'If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.' Absolutely true of dog training. Just write a few notes of the ABCs of what's going to happen, and then start your one-minute timer.

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And finally, number eight, remember it's a game. Dogs learn best, all of us learn best when training is fun. So, make sure you're lighthearted and have fun with this.

I would love to hear about your first or new and improved versions of shaping. Jump over to YouTube, leave me a comment. And I will follow this episode up by doing a troubleshooting podcast episode on shaping if there's enough of you that really have challenges that want my input on. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





Episode: #259

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Shaping and Reinforcement:

[Podcast Episode 5: What is Shaping And How Can Dogs Shape Us](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reinforcement, Permissions and Transfer of Value in Dog Training with Susan Garrett](#)

Learn How To Play ItsYerChoice:

[ItsYerChoice Summit](#)

Get Crate Games Online:

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Resources:

[Podcast Episode 243: Training My New Puppy, What He Knows So Far: Susan Garrett's Plan And Puppy Schedule](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 175: Food Luring VS Shaping In Dog Training: How Science Changed How I Teach Dogs](#)

[YouTube Playlist: The Heart/Mind Connection Side of Dog Training with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 202: Getting A Happy Well Behaved Dog With The ABCs Of Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 245: Make Dog Training Easy! Quick Guide To Antecedent Arrangements](#)

[Podcast Episode 16: The Thing Before Your Dog's Thing](#)

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)

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[Podcast Episode 69: Clicker Training: Will It Work For Every Dog?](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's Target Stick Training for Dogs Part One - All About Targeting](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[Podcast Episode 110: Is Your Over-Aroused Dog Just Over-Faced In Training?](#)

[Podcast Episode 89: Why Dogs Should Not Tug: The Truth Revealed](#)

[Blog Post: 6 Keys to Shaping Behaviour](#)

[Podcast Episode 151: How Location Specific Reinforcement Markers Will Improve Your Dog Training!](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 184: Proofing Vs Generalizing In Dog Training To Grow Skills And Confidence](#)



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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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