

Shaping, The Training Game

The training game is a great way to sharpen your shaping skills and have fun at the same time. First described in Karen Pryor's *Don't Shoot the Dog* (a definite must read, see resources page). It allows you to see and experience other trainers decision points, and to be aware of what you might have done instead. It allows trainers to make mistakes and learn from them without confusing some poor dog or unsuspecting person! Playing the game demonstrates the importance of accurate timing. It also gives people an idea of how the animal feels during the shaping process.

To play the training game you need at least two people, a trainer and a subject. You will also need a clicker and some primary reinforcers (sweets!). In my Clicker Workshops I often demonstrate the game by being the trainer and asking a volunteer subject to be the 'dog'. After that I would get pairs of volunteers to play both roles. We have the subject leave the room and the students decide on the behaviour to be shaped. The behaviour must be something easy to do physically which everyone can see. Some favorites are turning in a circle, standing on a particular square looking in a certain direction, standing still and clapping hands, pouring or drinking water, or turning on a light switch. For more experienced students we go for two or three step behaviours such as: picking up an object and perhaps giving it to someone, making a cup of tea, walking and clapping hands, go to a chair pick it up move to a target area and sit on it. Some of the students have become quite creative, but all the behaviours are sociably acceptable and safe to do!

Before the game begins it is essential that the students understand the importance of reinforcing the smallest approximations, although until they actually do it for themselves they are inclined to wait until they have the whole behaviour before the reinforcing. You could wait forever!

The student subject is brought into the room and instructed to begin moving randomly around the room and listen for clicks. Each time the student subject hears the click, he or she must return to the trainer and get an imaginary treat. This prevents the student subject from just standing in one spot and trying to think, which gives you nothing to reinforce. The student subject will also need to remember what he or she was doing when they were clicked. After playing in hundreds of training games we seem to get the same responses from the student subjects, they get fixated with the trainer; they watch for any sign or signal, in particular any facial or body movements, which might help them with the puzzle (this happens with dogs as well as people and if you continually have food on your person this adds to the fixation on the trainer instead of the behaviour being shaped). Some get stuck at the beginning as they try to reason out why they got clicked instead of using the click as a marker to give them the vital information to solve the puzzle. At this stage I generally give them a keep going signal so that we can give them further clues (clicks). To start with the game normally takes a couple of minutes with novice students, but before the session is over the time it takes is around 30 seconds!

The training game is usually very instructive and you can see from the audience's expression if a click was too slow in coming or was missed altogether! An unintentional click can also cause a few gasps of bewilderment. As a rule there should be no talking during the shaping process, the point of the game is that shaping is a non-verbal interaction. However, cheers, groans, laughter and applause are not only permitted but also are encouraged. The room is quite tense and definitely pulling in the direction of the student subject to get the reinforcing behaviour, and the trainer's complete attention in body and mind is focused on the shaping activity. When the behaviour has finally been accomplished by mutual agreement with rapturous applause from the audience (this is the reinforcer to the trainer for a job well done). I always ask how it felt to be the student subject and also what they think the target behaviour was. In some cases the student subject achieved the target behaviour but could not remember the whole process in which they had been involved. Others reported that there was an element of confusion, especially with a novice trainer. Generally the students learn that at the beginning of shaping a subject, more information was better than less.

Generally everyone involved in the Training Game, participants and audience alike, learns from almost every reinforcer (click). The trainer first of all gets to discover what timing is all about and how crucial it is to signal the click while the behaviour is actually occurring. It is clearly obvious, during the exercise in which everyone is participating by agreement and with a will to succeed, that whatever goes wrong is a function of the training, not the trainee subject. Once you have been the animal subject you will empathise with any animal subject you are training that has not yet fully understood what it is supposed to be doing, so that it easily makes mistakes. So once you have performed the non-verbal shaping with human subjects in an exercise, you may not be so quick to say that the student subject or animal you are training is "plotting revenge" for non-compliance, or "is stupid", or "deliberately trying it on" or "is off colour today" or "is totally untrainable". He or she is just untrained!

Variations of the game...

The built in delay : Have three people hold hands. The one at the right hand end of the group is the trainer. When he wants to reinforce the animal he squeezes the middle person's hand; that person squeezes the hand of the third person who then clicks or says "good". Watch what goes wrong with the shaping.

(by Marian Breland Baily and Robert Bailey).

The group cheer : Instead of picking one trainer let the whole group cheer and clap when the animal does something deserving of reinforcement and fall silent when the behaviour is not improving. The group can travel around in a building or outdoors, teaching the animal to fetch something from a distance, go over an obstacle, etc. fun for the kids, especially.

(by Janet Lewis)