

The Shaping Method

Shaping a behavior is done by breaking a behavior down into small steps called successive approximations. All the steps, when put together in order, result in a completed behavior. You reinforce each step of the behavior before moving onto the next step. You can think of it like climbing a ladder. The goal behavior is at the top of the ladder, but to get there you must take each step on the way up to succeed.

Shaping is particularly useful when you are working on complex behaviors. From the cat's perspective, it is a fun game in which they get to participate more directly in deciding which step to take next. It is also a game that involves a lot of mental activity on both sides of the training relationship – both the cat's and the human's brains will be put to good use in a shaping session.

CREATING BEHAVIOR WITH SHAPING

STEP 1: Create a shaping plan

Decide on what your goal behavior will be. Once you have a goal behavior selected, break that behavior down into small parts. For example, our goal behavior is to approach the front of the kennel.

The steps for a shaping plan include:

1. Look toward front of kennel
2. Turn head toward front of kennel
3. Turn body toward front of kennel
4. Stand up
5. Move one paw toward front of kennel
6. Take a step toward front of kennel
7. Take two steps toward front of kennel
8. Arrive at front of kennel

If the cat is fearful, you can still shape behavior! You can shape behaviors such as

- Turning head or body toward front of kennel
- Moving toward front of kennel
- Eye contact
- Moving location in the kennel

If the cat is very active or vocal, you can still shape behavior! You can shape behaviors such as

- Sitting or lying down
- Fetch
- Moving location in a kennel
- Sitting in a box

STEP 2: Click and Reinforce Each Successive Approximation

As soon as the cat completes the first step in the shaping plan, click and reinforce. Click and reinforce that step about 3-5 times. After the 5th time reinforcing the first step, wait for the cat to decide what to do next. If you have a well-thought out shaping plan, your cat will likely move onto the second step. Then, click and reinforce ONLY the second step about 3-5 times. Move through each of the steps in your shaping plan in order until you have created a completed goal behavior.

Each shaping plan you make is just a guide, not a rule! Each cat will respond differently to a shaping session. Some cats may go from the first step to the fifth step in one intuitive leap! Other cats may get stuck on a certain step and need you to either a) break down that step into even smaller pieces, or b) go back to the previous step for a few repetitions to regain their momentum. In the end your shaping plan is a road map. Regardless of the route you planned, your cat may take a scenic route to get to the final destination (goal behavior). Let your cat drive the process and enjoy the ride!

STEP 3a and 3b: Putting behavior on cue

After the cat is performing the complete goal behavior consistently, start associating the cue with the behavior. The cue is the visual or verbal signal that identifies specific behaviors for the cat. The cat will not make the association between a cue and the behavior until we teach her.

STEP 3a: Cue as cat is completing behavior

As soon as you can predict with certainty the cat will complete the behavior you have been clicking/reinforcing, give the cue as the cat is completing the behavior. For example, if you are working on “sit”, you will say “sit” (or give the visual cue) as the cat begins to bend her knees to sit. As soon as she completes the sit, click and reinforce. You will want to do this at least 10 times before using the cue before the cat completes behavior.

STEP 3b: Cue before cat begins behavior

Say the verbal cue “sit” (or give the visual cue) before the cat has started to bend her knees to sit. If you have created a reliable association between your cue and the behavior, your cat will sit when you use the cue.

Once you have the behavior truly on cue, the behavior is considered “mastered.” You are then ready to start working on a new behavior utilizing the Shaping method.

Using the Shaping Method for Some Common Behaviors

Roll Over

“Roll Over” is a behavior that can be defined in two ways. A partial roll over (180°) is defined by the cat moving from laying one side of his body to the opposite side by “rolling” on his back. The cat starting from a “down” position and rolling to the left or right, ending in the same position from which he started, defines a full roll over (360°).

- The successive approximations for “roll over” may include:
 - Partial Roll Over:
 - Start with cat laying on one side (left or right).
 - Cat moves head from side to center.
 - Cat shifts weight moving shoulders and/or hips from side to center. (Cat will be laying directly on his back at this point.)
 - Cat moves head/shoulders/hips to opposite side from starting position, resulting in laying on the cat’s opposite side.
 - Full Roll Over:
 - Start with cat in a “down” position.
 - Cat turns head toward his back.
 - Cat shifts weight onto one shoulder.
 - Cat shifts weight onto one hip.
 - Cat shifts to laying completely on his back.
 - Cat continues to shift weight onto opposite side.
 - Cat continues to shift weight back onto stomach and into a “down” position.
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Roll Over.” A common visual cue for this behavior is using your pointer finger to make the “rainbow” motion from one side of the cat to the other.

Nose (or Head) Bump

“Nose (or Head) Bump” is a behavior that is defined by the cat using his nose or forehead to touch an object.

- The successive approximations for nose (head) bump may include:
 - Cat moves nose (head) forward toward object. (Cat may not move body toward object.)
 - Cat moves entire body toward object.
 - Cat touches object with nose (head).
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- You can choose to be specific about which body part (nose or head) cat uses to touch the object. You can also choose to be specific about how hard (light or hard pressure) or how long (momentary touch or holding nose/head on object for a specific length of time) the cat engages in the behavior. If you choose to add any of these to the shaping plan, remember to add only one at a time to the plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Touch.” A common visual cue for this behavior is pointing to the object you would like the cat to touch.

Fetch

“Fetch” is a behavior defined by the cat bringing an object to you and dropping it in front of you. It is usually easiest if you use softer objects that are easy for the cat to pick up their mouth.

- The successive approximations for fetch may include:
 - Cat touches object with nose.
 - Cat puts mouth on/around object.
 - Cat picks up object with mouth. (It is okay if the cat immediately drops object after picking it up at this step.)
 - Incrementally increase how long the cat holds the object in his mouth.
 - Cat carries object toward you. (You may need to increase how far the cat has to carry the object incrementally.)
 - Cat carries object to you (or your chosen area) and drops object.
 - You toss object a short distance away, cat goes to object and repeats first five steps.
 - Incrementally increase the distance away from you that you toss the object.
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Fetch.” A common visual cue for this behavior is picking up and tossing the object.

High-Five, High-Ten/Give Me Ten, and Wave

“High-Five” is a behavior that is defined by the cat placing a paw against a human hand. “High-Ten” or “Give Me Ten” is a variation of this behavior that requires the cat to place both paws against human hands. “Wave” is yet another version where the cat does not make contact with their paw, but rather repeatedly “waves” their paw up and down.

- The successive approximations for these behaviors may include:
 - High-Five
 - Cat shifts weight onto one side (left or right)
 - Cat picks up one front paw
 - Cat moves front paw up to at least shoulder height
 - Cat moves front paw forward toward open palm
 - Cat touches open palm
 - Give Me Ten/High-Ten
 - Cat shifts weight back onto hips/back legs
 - Cat picks up one front paw

- Cat places one front paw on open palm
 - While keeping first paw on open palm, cat picks up second front paw
 - Cat places second paw on open palm
- Wave
 - Same as “High-Five” except instead of touching the open palm, the cat moves paw up and down at least once.
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- Common cues:
 - *For High-Five:* A common verbal cue for this behavior is “High-Five.” A common visual cue for this behavior is placing your open palm facing the cat (fingers pointing upward) at about the cat’s shoulder level.
 - *For Give Me Ten:* A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Give me ten.” A common visual cue is placing both hands, open palms facing the cat (fingers pointing upward) at about the cat’s shoulder level.
 - *For Wave:* A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Wave.” A common visual cue for this behavior is moving your hand up and down, palm facing down. Alternatively, you can repeatedly bend all fingers where your fingers join your hand.

Jump Over an Object or Through a Hoop

“Jump” over an object or through a hoop is a behavior defined by the cat jumping from one side of an object (over or through) to the other side of the same object. Initially it may be easier to place the object directly on the floor, allowing the cat to walk over/through the object. As the cat gains confidence, you can begin slowly to move the object off the floor requiring the cat to jump over/through the object.

- The successive approximations for jump may include:
 - Walk toward object
 - Walk over/through object with front feet
 - Walk over/through object with all four feet
 - Raise object .5 inch from floor, repeat first three steps
 - Raise object 1 inch from floor, repeat first three steps
 - Continue to raise object to desired height in .5 inch increments, repeating first three steps at each new height.
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Jump.” A common visual cue for this behavior is moving your finger from the “start” to the “finish.”

Sit

“Sit” is a behavior that is defined by the cat bending her back legs and resting her hips on the floor while her front legs remain extended.

- The successive approximations for this behavior may include:
 - Starting to bend back legs at the knees
 - Bending back legs half-way at the knees
 - Bending back legs fully while resting hips on the floor and keeping front legs extended
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is “Sit.” A common visual cue for this behavior is moving your hand

(palm open and facing upward) from about the cat's chest level to above their head.

Sit Pretty

- The successive approximations for "sit pretty" may include:
 - Cat sits
 - Cat shifts weight from front legs to back legs/hips
 - Cat picks up front legs while sitting
 - Incrementally increase how long the cat holds her frontlegs off ground while in a sit.
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is "Sit Pretty." A common visual cue for this behavior is moving your hand in a "J" motion in front of the cat.

Coming When Called

"Coming When Called" (aka a "recall") is a behavior that is defined by the cat orienting toward the human and approaching the human. Most commonly, this behavior is complete once the cat has come within inches of the human who is calling her. It could even end by the cat jumping into a waiting human lap for positive attention!

- The successive approximations for this behavior may include:
 - Turning head toward you
 - Turning body toward you
 - Taking one step toward you
 - Taking two steps toward you
 - Taking three or more steps toward you
 - Approaching you until she is within inches of you
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue for this behavior is "come," or saying the cat's name and then "come" (such as, "Fluffy, come.") A common visual cue for this behavior is moving your hand (palm open and facing toward you) by bending your elbow. Go from an outstretched, straight arm to 90° bend in your elbow. Additionally, you may also choose to use a different visual cue such as a "point" from your hand to a location near you.

Eye Contact

"Eye Contact" is a behavior that is defined by the cat looking at the trainer and making direct eye contact. In contrast to a stare, both human and cat should be looking at one another with soft eyes. You may even observe slow blinking from the cat, which is a positive sign.

- The successive approximations for this behavior may include:
 - Turning head toward you
 - Turning head toward your face
 - Looking in your direction
 - Making eye contact
- Remember to click, then reinforce each step only a few times before moving onto the next step in your shaping plan.
- A common verbal cue is saying "look" or "watch me." A common visual cue for this behavior is touching your nose or pointing toward your eyes.