Free-shaping

Shaping is the reinforcement of behaviors that are closer and closer to our final desired behavior. For example, something you might shape is your dog getting onto a mat. If we simply lure our dog onto the mat, they often are so focused on the treat they don't notice where they are stepping. Instead, we will reward small interactions with the mat. At first, just looking or sniffing it gets a click and a treat. Then we raise our criteria to include at least one foot touching the mat before we mark and reward. After rewarding for just one foot, we start to wait for two feet before rewarding, then eventually three feet, and eventually all four feet must be on the mat before we click and treat. After that we might also up the criteria to include a sit or a down once they are on the mat.

Free-shaping is shaping without a specific goal in mind. The behaviors are learner-driven, meaning our dog is the one choosing what they do. Free shaping encourages your dog's curiosity and comfort in trying new things.

A popular free-shaping game is "101 Things to Do with a Box":

Step 1: Get a box of some sort. A cardboard box is great but you can also use a plastic storage container or something similar. You want this to be a novel object, not your dog's bed or a familiar toy. You will also need a clicker and some treats.

Step 2: Place the box down in the room with your dog. Be ready with your clicker. When you place the novel object down, your dog is likely to investigate it (especially if you go over and look at it yourself!). This investigation may be walking over and sniffing near it, looking at it curiously, or sniffing it directly. Whatever it is that they do with the new box, you will click for it. Instead of giving the treat to their mouth like we usually do, show them the treat, but toss it a little ways <u>away</u> from the box. This way your dog will trot after the treat and once they have eaten it, they have the opportunity to approach the box again and receive another click and another tossed treat.

Step 3: After a few times of clicking and tossing a treat for simple sniffing, wait and see if your dog offers anything else with the box. Maybe they paw at it, maybe they nudge it, maybe they lick it. The important thing is there are no wrong answers. Each time you will continue to click for the interaction, and show and throw your treat. Make sure, as with any clicker training, that you are not holding the treats in your hand, potentially distracting your dog. The treats should stay in a treat pouch

or a pocket until after you have clicked.

Step 4: If your dog does something you really like with the box, such as jumping up on it, getting in it, or anything else you deem interesting, you can start clicking and treating just for behaviors related to that action, selecting for that specific behavior. Once the behavior is in its "final" stage, you can add a verbal or visual cue to it.

Shaping works because behavior is variable. Your dog is not a robot - he is not going to do the same behavior the exact same way over and over again. Think about a dog that gives his paw for "shake". Sometimes the dog might hold his paw a little higher, or wave it a little before placing it in your hand, or slam it into your hand harder than other times. You can shape any behavior by selecting for the things you prefer. Just remember to choose one thing at a time to work on. You can't work on the speed, strength, and height of the shake all at the same time. Choose a component of the behavior to select for and work on them one at a time. For example, if you want a quick response from your dog, click and treat for only the shakes your dog gives within two seconds.