

Mat (an exercise in shaping)

Level One

Prerequisite Skills: Handler and dog understand the Clicker as a reward marker. Shaping works best if the dog will work for a food reward (rewarding with a toy can be too exciting and distract during the shaping process, especially for a dog who is not used to learning this way). Shaping gets a dog to think, skills taught with shaping tend to stick. It is recommended the handler has played the shaping games with another person, both acting as the dog and as the handler, to understand how to click to shape behaviour.

Suggested Command

Verbal Command	Signal
Mat, or Go Mat	None, or look and point to the mat

Description of Trick

When instructed Mat (or "Go Mat"), the dog goes to the mat, and drops on it. Mat Training is an exercise that lends itself to being taught using shaping and a clicker, and may be a good introduction to shaping for those handlers who have not tried to do it before. Shaping uses lots of treats (one reason the dog can really like it), adjust the dogs diet to avoid weight gain if doing a lot of training using shaping). With Mat training, the mat is made into an attractive place to be, with frequent praise and rewards for lying on it. Like crate training, Mat training can be used as an exercise in self control. In multi-dog households, if all the dogs are mat trained, the dogs can sometimes be trained in turns, with the dogs that are not currently being trained put in a stay (and rewarded), on the mat. If you are training another dog with something that is really exciting unless your dog has had a lot of mat, and stay training, physical restraint in a crate or with a lead may still be required. Mat training can also be used as an aid to teaching a dog to perform commands from a distance.

Steps to Teach

Steps

The amount of time to train a dog to perform a task using shaping can vary. A dog new to shaping may take a while to understand the game and start offering behaviours. If you have not used shaping before, please be patient, and defer from using lures (food or crowding the dog with body language) other than looking at the target, to guide the dog to perform this command. When a dog "gets" shaping" and starts offering behaviours, it can be a lot of fun seeing what they come up with.

Place the dog on a long lead (you want to avoid giving too many commands).

Have clicker and treats ready. Place a mat large enough for the dog to lie on, on the ground about two to three foot away from yourself and the dog.

If the dog shows any interest in the mat, eg looks in its direction (click and treat). If the dog does not show interest in the mat, click and treat if the dog looks toward the ground. Reward placement is important, reward in the direction of the target (mat). Ideally, only click and reward a particular behaviour two or three times, then delay the click until the dog performs something a little closer to what you want. To get rewarded the dog needs to up the ante, and try something else a little closer to the task. (Eg instead of glancing at the mat, looking longer at the mat, walking towards the mat, touching the mat with one paw, or two paws etc).

When the dog touches the mat (particularly if it has taken some time), give it a jackpot (click about three times quickly in succession and give a large number of food rewards at once. Work toward the dog having all four feet on the mat. Clicking and rewarding and moving back to start point.

Once the dog can get all four feet on the mat, try commanding the dog to drop on the mat (use a verbal cue or hand signal the first few times), reset the dog (using lead and/or body language to get it to move away from the mat) between turns. Once the dog is going to and dropping on the mat (whole body, not just part of the body), introduce the verbal command Mat (or Go Mat) as you click the behaviour. The next milestone is to start saying mat earlier as the cue to the behaviour. Move the mat to different locations. To increase the challenge, try increasing the distance the mat is away from you. Delay the click and reward slightly to increase the duration the dog stays on the mat.

Shaping can be frustrating for a dog that hasn't done it before. If a dog becomes stuck, "reset" it (using the lead and/or body language to move away from the mat to a different position and start again. A frustrated or shutdown dog may need to be rewarded more frequently, for more repetitions, using smaller steps. If the dog is really frustrated and losing interest despite resets, have a break, play and have some fun together before returning to the task. With practice the dog will become keen to work out what you want, and shaping will become fun for the dog too.

Click timing is critical with shaping, and is the major cause of dog confusion and frustration when shaping. Play the shaping game with a human partner, and try some clicker reaction time games to sharpen your clicker skills.

Variations Try getting the dog to stay on the mat for extended periods, and in more exciting situations. It is a good idea to use a release word to let the dog know when it is OK to get off the mat. The mat gives the dogs a visible and tactile target.

Advanced Moves: Try using the mat to get the dog to perform tricks, or commands from a distance (start with the basics like sit and down, and work up to your tricks). If your dog knows how to reverse, try to get it to reverse onto the mat. The mat can be used as a marker in training for sending the dog out in a dog dancing routine. It can be phased out but cutting the mat into smaller and smaller pieces.