

Dogs operate on the same principle. They hang out in the kitchen when we're preparing a meal because they occasionally receive a handout. The behavior of lying underfoot while you're cooking has been rewarded, so the likelihood of the behavior happening again increases. We can use that knowledge in our training. By identifying and rewarding behaviors that we like, we increase the likelihood that the dog will offer them again in the hope of receiving another reward.

WHAT ARE REWARDS?

Rewards are whatever your dog likes and will work for. A reward can be a belly rub, the opportunity to play, or food. For the purposes of this training, we will use small food treats as rewards. Little bits of cut-up cheese or hot dogs or cooked chicken make excellent rewards. They are convenient, can be kept in a small dish beside you or in your pocket, and are easy to deliver to your dog when he does something you like. They are eaten quickly so that your dog is ready to try another behavior in the hope of earning another reward.

WHAT IS SHAPING?

The term "shaping" refers to the process of teaching a behavior by rewarding the dog for behaviors that come gradually closer to the desired behavior. In the case of painting, the final behavior is the dog swiping the easel repeatedly with his paw, while wearing the "Paintin' Paw." Most dogs won't automatically offer this behavior, so we have to shape, or encourage their behavior by rewarding behaviors that come gradually closer to the desired "painting" behavior.

SUPPLIES YOU'LL NEED

Nontoxic poster paint, tasty dog treats, clicker, Paintin' Paw® with sponge, drop cloth, water, towels, Artist's canvas or paper and cardboard.

Paintin' Paws® and clickers can be obtained on the Dog Scouts of America website: www.dogscouts.com/sparkys

THE SEVEN STEPS OF SHAPING

STEP 1: BUILD A BRIDGE

Teach your dog a signal that means, "You did something I like and will get a reward." Many animal trainers use a clicker, which is a small plastic box with a flat metal piece in it. When you push the metal piece with your thumb, it makes a sharp clicking noise. By "clicking" and then immediately giving a food treat (reward), your dog will learn that a click is always followed by a treat. The click can then be used to "capture" a behavior by clicking at the exact second the dog performs a behavior you like. The dog will associate the click/reward with the behavior it was performing when it heard the click, and will begin to offer that behavior more often in the hope of getting another reward.

STEP 2: ELICIT A PAWING BEHAVIOR

The first goal is to get your dog lifting its foot. If your dog knows the "give paw" command, you can ask for that behavior, and click/reward each time he does. If he doesn't know that behavior, you can hold a piece of food in your hand and "tease" him with it by opening your hand and showing it to him, then quickly closing your hand when he tries to take it. He will probably paw at your hand to get at the treat. Click/reward each time he touches your hand with his paw. You're not ready to use a "cue" or command to ask for the behavior. You will do that once your dog is offering the final version of the behavior. For now, just wait for the dog to offer the paw lift and be ready to reward him when he does.

STEP 3: SHAPE A WAVE

Once your dog is consistently raising his paw towards your hand, you can "shape" a wave behavior by gradually raising your hand higher so that your dog has to raise his paw higher to touch your hand. Then begin clicking (rewarding) just before he touches your hand with his paw. Ignore other behaviors. No scolding or nagging please, this is meant to be FUN for you and your dog.

STEP 4: REWARD CONTACT WITH EASEL

By now your dog should be consistently offering high paw swipes. Now present the easel (cardboard with paper taped in place) and click/reward each time he touches the easel with his paw.

