Positive Teaching Methods:
Shaping, Capturing, Targeting, and Luring

Positive training methods always work to our dogs' motivations. Rewards, as our dogs define them, are the consequence for the desired behavior. There is never any physical control or correction in these methods. Our dogs are making the choices that we would want them to make, because it works to their advantage. Within the realm of rewards-based training, there are four teaching methods that we use to help our dogs enjoy learning new behaviors. While most handlers default to one or two methods more than the others, all methods are valid and all are generally used at one point or another with all dogs. What you want to teach your dog has everything to do with the "best" method to use. Using all four methods gives you a bigger and more flexible toolbox for building desirable behavior with your dog. All four methods require your dog to engage in problem-solving activities, which have unparalleled life enrichment benefits for dogs. Typically, dogs trained with these methods in the past are eager to engage in additional training and problem-solving activities.

Shaping is the process of "building a particular behavior by using a series of small steps to achieve it. Shaping allows you to create behavior from scratch . . . by drawing on your animal's natural ability to learn." (Karen Pryor, "The Shape of Shaping: Some Historical Notes", clickertraining.com). At its core, Shaping is a powerful problem-solving activity for your dog. It is also fun for the handler to guide a dog through the process of achieving a behavior through the Give-and-Take of Shaping. The challenge of Shaping is the need to break down the ultimate behavior into very small slices or increments. You, as handler, need to take baby steps, giving your dog easily achievable milestones to keep him engaged in learning. Your dog earns frequent Clicks! and Treats for these small increments along the learning curve to keep him focused and offering progressions in the behavior. Taking too big a step or putting too many steps together at once is called "lumping," and is usually when the learning process stalls. We use Shaping in many ways in dog training, from the everyday uses (proofing behavior with the 3 D's) to more discretionary uses (trick training).

Capturing takes advantage of a naturally-occurring behavior and puts it on cue. For example, if your dog is prone to sneezing or shaking off, be ready for it, and when your dog next does that behavior, Click! and Treat. As you start to see that your dog recognizes that the behavior is what is earning him the reward, say the word cue (or use your hand cue) immediately before/as your dog begins the behavior. Click! and Treat as soon as your dog completes the behavior. With sufficient repetition, the word or hand cue will prompt the behavior. Capturing is often used for trick training, but has everyday uses as well, such as training a polite Sit in front as a Visitor Greeting. Sometimes Capturing takes longer to establish a behavior, but it will be reliable because it is based on a behavior that comes naturally to the dog.

Targeting uses a non-food method of prompting a behavior. It borrows a little from both Shaping and Luring. You teach your dog to touch a target of some sort with his nose or paw. Then you move that target to put the dog in a clickable position. For example, if you are teaching your dog to Sit and he targets his nose to a palm, you can use your palm up and over the dog's head to initiate your dog sitting as he lifts his head to touch his nose to the palm. He then gets the Click! and Treat when his backside hits the floor. So it is a bit like Luring in using the Target to initiate body position with the dog. And it is a bit like Shaping to first get the dog to Target something and then Shape that into another behavior. Targeting is a particularly effective tool for behaviors that involve a specific physical position or movement from the dog (Stand, Wait, Come, etc.).

Luring uses the primary reinforcer (usually food) to prompt some behavior with the dog. The Click! and Treat (with the Lure) come when the dog has completed the behavior. As with the above Sit example, the handler holds the Lure up and over the dog's head so he follows it up and back with his nose, and his backside hits the floor in the process. That's when he receives the Click! and Treat. Luring can be a fairly quick teaching method and is the default approach of many trainers. The challenge can be transitioning the behavior off the obvious presence of the Lure/Reward so its presence does not become a condition for doing the behavior. As far as your dog is concerned, the "Lure" can be food in the hand or your hand on a pocket/treat bag,. That's why it can be hard to transition away from the Lure: the desire to be timely in your delivery of the reward versus the ready availability of the reward being perceived by the dog to be a Lure. Just remember

that the Click! serves as a bridge between when your dog does what you are looking for and the delivery of the reward. You have time to get a treat out of a pouch or pocket after you Click! Empty your hands as soon as possible! To transition on a new behavior that is starting to become solid, prepare by having food in both hands. Prompt the behavior with the food Lure in the cueing hand. When the dog successfully completes the behavior, Click! and Treat *from the other hand*. This last part is important. Get your dog used to food coming from somewhere other than the Lure hand. After several repetitions, you should be able to begin fading (intermittently using and not using) the Lure.

Teaching More Complex Behaviors

When your dog has mastered several basic building blocks of behavior that can be put together in various ways to create a more complex behavior, it's time to start **Chaining**. In truth, Chaining is a form of Shaping, but we refer to it differently when it is used to put together more complex "chains" of behavior. For example, teaching a dog to pick up and put away his toys is a series of individually taught behaviors that have been Chained together. Typically, a complex behavior is **Back Chained**, meaning the training process begins with the final element of the chain, and the rest of the behavior chain is built backward to the starting point of the behavior. Naturally, this requires a fair amount of planning and precision on the handler's part in order to determine the successful links of the Chain. But again, once a dog has learned a Chain or two, they are eager to offer their contributions to the Chaining process! Ever see a video of the New Zealand Driving Shelter Dogs? (See the video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chrzpnL1OEM). That's all accomplished with Shaping, Capturing, Targeting and Luring with Chaining. The sky's the limit!