

# Bendigo Obedience Dog Club

## Training Tip 6: Shaping



Definition: **Shaping**, or as it's formally known, “**shaping** by successive approximations,” simply means breaking down a behaviour into tiny increments, and reinforcing the **dog** at each incremental step until you've achieved the full behaviour

What does this mean in real life training with our dogs? I'll use an example to explain.

The Stay - we can break the training down into an infinite number of steps to teach our dogs the exercise. We all know what the final outcome is that we want – we tell the dog to stay and they do not move. We can walk off, jump around, leave the room etc and they will still be there when we come back to them.

How do we break down the “final outcome” into steps to teach our dog what it is they are expected to do. I'll just use the very beginning of teaching a stay as to how we can break this exercise up into little pieces/steps. These little pieces/steps are progressive approximations of the end behaviour we want.

1. Tell your dog to stay and give hand signal (most people use an open flat hand in front of the dogs muzzle)
2. Take a small step away from your dog.
3. Woops – your dog got up! Remember that at this stage, they do not understand what “stay” means.
4. This is where we can break the exercise down into little bite size approximations to help our dog learn and understand what is expected of them when we use the verbal “stay” and visual signal (hand in front of muzzle)
5. Repeat step 1
6. This time, shift your body weight and move one foot forward only 20cm.
7. If the dog does not move, reward and release your dog! Congratulations, you don't need an even smaller bite size of learning.
8. If the dog did move, repeat step 1 and shift your bodyweight as if you are about to move, but don't move your foot forward.
9. If the dog does not move, reward and release your dog!
10. Once you have one step, build up to 2, 3 etc and distraction can be added in small increments as well.

So you can see that we can break this training down into little steps....we want the dog to understand the exercise and by making each step successful and rewarding for the dog they learn. At each step, we are asking a little bit more from them to take them through successive approximations to arrive at the final behaviour.

The incremental steps above are an example....some dogs you will easily be able to take one step away and for others, it may take breaking it down into 10 or more approximations of the exercise to be able to get to the point where you can take 1 step away from your dog. Either way, it does not matter – dogs like people are individuals and learn at different rates and in different ways. If what you are doing works....keep doing it!!

**If your dog “fails” an exercise, it is not stubborn or dumb—it just doesn't understand what you are asking it to do. Break it down into smaller steps of successive approximations to help it learn and understand what it is you are asking for.**