ANIMAL BEHAVIOR CONSULTANTS OF THE CHESAPEAKE, LLC
Connecting people and their pets
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Training New Behavior

<u>Shaping</u> - Modify existing behavior to reach a new, final behavior

<u>Technical term</u> - Differential Reinforcement of Successive Approximations

<u>Behavior topography</u> – How the behavior looks or sounds (as described objectively to an outside observer). Some major dimensions of behavior topography are frequency, duration, latency, and intensity. When you are training, one aspect of topography is worked at a time. For example, if you are teaching a vocal behavior (making a noise) you do not teach the animal to make the sound for longer (or shorter) at the same time you are trying to get the sound to be louder (or quieter). Work on one aspect at a time.

<u>Being a Teacher (or trainer)</u>

The teacher's job is to make each step (approximation) the correct size so the learner is able to get rewarded. The learner is rewarded for achieving each level - for succeeding - NOT just for trying. But steps are small enough that the learner succeeds and keeps moving toward the final behavior goal. Ideally, training session should create a positive feeling in the teacher. If this isn't the case…rethink things, ask for help, revise your training plan, have someone videotape the session and look at yourself, etc. And always, when the "learner is in the room" (i.e. you're doing a session with your animal): you should keep your focus on the session and the learner. Make sure the learner is accomplishing something and can be reinforced. If you need to problem solve or discuss what's happening, it is more productive to end the session (after asking for a simple behavior and rewarding the learner), have the discussion, then step back into the session and finish up.

As a teacher, it will take you time and practice to develop your "eye" for when to reinforce and what sized approximations work best in general as well as how to quickly tailor these for different animals or situations. While some people are "naturals" and can take this to an artform, the rest of us can use good old practice and learning to get better. Just because you may not be the world's best "natural" trainer doesn't mean you can't learn how to be a really good teacher!

Outline of process

I. Operationalize the final behavior – describe the final behavior, picture it in detail so that others can understand or "see" it as well, write this down.

II. Determine the current existing behavior the animal already does that most closely matches the final behavior

III. Define the reinforcers to be used

IV. Write down the approximations to go from II to I

V. Try it!

VI. Periodically review progress and make modifications if needed. Keeping a written record of sessions and changes will help with this process

An example has been provided after the form.

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Training New Behavior, Shaping Form

Date _____

Trainer _____

Animal Species and ID _____

When/where will training occur _____

Initial anticipated time to train behavior _____

I. **Final Behavior (include cue if relevant):**

_____
_____
_____
_____

II. **Current Existing Behavior:**

_____
_____
_____

III. **Reinforcer(s):**

_____
_____
_____

IV. **Planned Approximations:**

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V. **NOTES** (anticipated challenges and solutions, mentor, plan for assistance if you have concerns about behavior progressing, etc).

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Example

Date   April 26, 2010
Trainer: Jane Doe
Animal Species and ID: Bearded dragon, house-name 'BD', Tracks ID 399001
When/where will training occur? Training will take place after servicing the exhibit cage and before feeding the main meal on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings. Training sessions will be about 5 minutes and with food prep/cleaning it will be 15-20 minutes total. She is in an exhibit cage with some other bearded dragons. None of the animals have done training sessions before.
Initial anticipated time to train behavior: 4 weeks

I. **Final Behavior (include cue if relevant)**: BD will touch tip of rostrum to a round target and hold contact for 5 seconds. She will have relaxed body posture (head up but not extended upward, body slightly off the ground but legs not extended) with a closed mouth. The cue will be the target (no verbal or other visual cue). The target is a 4 cm white plastic disc on a ¼ in. dowel.

II. **Current Existing Behavior:** Look at target

III. **Reinforcer(s)**: ½ cricket fed on tongs (she already eats crickets and half crickets this way). I can use 2 crickets (4 pieces) in each training session; this is part of her normal diet. After she does the behavior, I will introduce the food item on the tongs. I will have the crickets pre-cut in a dish balanced on the outside edge of the exhibit and will hold a cricket piece in the tongs in my right hand outside the tank. I'll put the target in with my left hand and feed her with my right hand when she does the behavior.

IV. **Planned Approximations** - target will be held approximately 4 inches from her. I've already seen that she doesn't react negatively to the target (no change in breathing or body posture).
   a. Look at target with an eye
   b. Move head in direction of target
   c. Lean toward target
   d. Moves a limb toward target
   e. Moves body toward target
   f. Nose next to target
   g. Nose touch target
   h. Hold nose on target for 1 second
   i. Hold nose on target for 2 seconds
   j. Hold nose on target for 5 seconds

NOTES (possible challenges and solutions, mentor, plan for assistance if you have concerns about behavior progressing, etc). The animal is in a mixed species group right now and other animals may interfere with training. One possible solution would be to remove her from the primary enclosure for training but I'd like to try her in the exhibit first. I have never trained an animal before and will ask the other herpetology keeper to watch me train and give me feedback during my first few sessions. I am not using a "bridge" like a clicker for this behavior.

Next behavior to be trained would be walk greater distances to reach the target.