

# The Training Game

The Training Game is a great way to sharpen your **shaping** (building new behaviors by selectively reinforcing variations in existing **behavior**) skills and have fun at the same time. It allows you to see and experience other trainers' decisions, and think critically about your own training techniques. It also allows trainers to make mistakes, and learn from them, without confusing an animal. Most valuable of all, it allows you to see the training process from the viewpoint of the animal.

You will need at least one more person from your household to play with you. Try taking turns being the trainer and the trainee.

## The Rules

While this game may be played by two people, larger groups are more fun. If you're able to play with more than two people, make sure there is only one trainer and one animal at a time. The one person who is selected as the **animal** should go out of hearing range while the others choose a **trainer** and a behavior for the trainer to train.

The behavior must be something easy to do physically - something everyone can see. Simple and favorite behaviors are things like turning in a circle, pouring or drinking water, turning on a light switch, picking up an object, opening or closing a door or window, or sitting in a chair. Try to avoid two - or three-step behaviors - these can be very tricky to train.

The Trainer will use a **clicker**. Animal trainers make use of the clicker as a marker to mark a desired response. The sound of the clicker is an excellent marker because it is unique, quick, and consistent. You can find several different types of clickers at the pet store. A **handclap, snap, whistle** or other noise as a reinforcer can work as well. Each time the animal hears the sound, the trainer gives them a small treat for completing a behavior or step towards the desired behavior.

There should be no talking during the game; the point of the game is that shaping a behavior is a non-verbal process. Cheers, groans, laughter, and applause on the other hand, are not only permitted but encouraged. When the behavior is accomplished, the animal then becomes the trainer, and the group chooses another animal. The new animal leaves the room; the group chooses a new behavior, and the game starts over again. When everyone has been both the trainer and the animal, the game is complete.

## Helpful Hints

If you get totally stuck, and the animal has either stopped working altogether or is uselessly repeating the same action over and over, here are some things you can try:

- Change the environment by moving to another part of the room, or another area outside if you're playing outdoors.
- Try a new behavior.
- Be generous with reinforcements; it's better to reinforce some behavior, even the wrong behavior, than to reinforce nothing at all.
- Try using a prompt. For example, to get someone to bend over, you might drop an object on the floor like a set of keys. Reinforce the person for leaning down to pick them up.
- Check to see if you are trying to train more than one behavior at once.

## Variations

### The Built-in Delay

- Have three people hold hands. The one at the right side of the group is the trainer. When they want to reinforce the animal, they squeeze the middle person's hand; that person squeezes the hand of the third person, who then clicks the clicker or gives a verbal reinforcement of "good".

### The Group Cheer

- Instead of picking one trainer, let the whole group cheer and clap when the animal does something deserving of reinforcement, and fall silent when the behavior is not improving. The group can travel around in, teaching the animal to fetch something from a distance, or go over an obstacle, etc.

## Post-Activity Questions and Activities

- How did it feel to be the trainer or the animal?
- What could the trainer have done differently?
- If you tried one of the variations, was training easier or harder?
- Why do you think positive reinforcement is important or useful at the zoo?