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Shaping is often described in simple terms: reinforcing successive approximations toward a desired behavior. But in practice, shaping is a dynamic, responsive process that requires acute observation, careful judgment, and an appreciation of the learner's unique repertoire.

Where prompting and fading help us transfer control of an existing behavior to a new cue, shaping is our tool when the behavior does not yet exist at all. It is the craft of building a bridge between what the learner can currently do and what we want them to do, one behavioral plank at a time.

The Foundations of Shaping

At its core, shaping involves:

- Identifying the Terminal Behavior: What is the ultimate action, skill, or verbal response you want to see?
- Determining the Starting Point: What is the learner already doing that bears any resemblance to the goal? This is not always obvious. It requires observing subtle behaviors that can be built upon.
- Reinforcing Approximations: The art of recognizing and reinforcing behaviors that inch the learner closer to the goal.
- Refining the Criteria: Knowing when to stop reinforcing the current approximation and shift the goalposts closer to the terminal behavior.

The Art of Selection: When and What to Shape

Shaping is best reserved for:

- Behaviors not in the repertoire and unlikely to emerge with prompts alone.
- Fine motor skills or complex sequences that require gradual improvement.
- Vocal behaviors, especially in speech development or communication training.

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Vignettes of Shaping in Practice

1. **Shaping Speech:** Jordan, a nonverbal four-year-old, is learning to say “water.” Initially, Jordan only vocalizes a soft “wa” when reaching for his cup. The therapist reinforces this with immediate access to the water. Over time, reinforcement is withheld for “wa” and delivered only when Jordan says “waw.” Eventually, only “water” earns the reinforcement. Across sessions, the therapist listens carefully for clearer approximations, rewarding each closer attempt until Jordan confidently says “water.”

2. **Shaping Sign Language:** Leila, a six-year-old with hearing impairment, is being taught the sign for “more.” Initially, Leila claps her hands when she wants more snack, a gesture not quite the ASL sign but close. The teacher reinforces this hand motion. Then, reinforcement is only given when Leila brings her hands together in a similar shape to the “more” sign. Finally, the teacher only reinforces the correct, complete sign for “more.” This progression helps Leila acquire meaningful signs through her natural motor repertoire.

3. **Combining Shaping with Prompting and Fading:** Jordan has just joined a fitness program with a personal trainer, aiming to improve his push-up form. Initially, Jordan can only perform push-ups from his knees with a shallow bend of the elbows. The trainer sets this as the first approximation and provides reinforcement in the form of praise and encouragement.

   Once Jordan consistently performs knee push-ups with proper elbow alignment, the trainer changes the criterion: full push-ups from the toes but still with a shallow range. To help Jordan achieve this, the trainer uses physical prompts such as guiding Jordan’s hips for proper body alignment and verbal prompts to encourage full extension. As Jordan gains strength and control, the trainer fades these prompts, providing only verbal cues and gestures.

   When Jordan can perform standard push-ups with shallow depth independently, the trainer increases the criterion to require deeper bends of the elbows. Again, prompts are reintroduced as needed to shape the new performance level and then faded. This cycle of adjusting the criterion, prompting to meet the new level, and fading support continues until Jordan achieves proper full-range push-ups with excellent form.

4. **Shaping Basketball Skills:** Carlos is working on improving his basketball free-throw technique. At first, any attempt to shoot the ball in the general direction of the basket is praised. As his form improves, the coach only praises shots with proper elbow positioning. Later, only shots that arc correctly and reach the basket are reinforced. Eventually, only successful baskets with proper technique receive praise, resulting in refined, effective shooting form.

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Common Missteps in Shaping

- Reinforcing Too Long: Staying at an approximation too long can stall progress.
- Moving Too Quickly: Raising the criterion before the learner is ready can cause frustration.
- Inconsistent Criteria: Unclear reinforcement rules confuse learners and slow progress.

Integrating Shaping with Other Strategies

Shaping rarely exists in a vacuum: - With Prompting: Prompts can help evoke an approximation to be shaped. - With Modeling: Demonstrating the target behavior can guide the learner. - With Chaining: For complex skills, shaping might establish one component, later linked through chaining.

Ethical Considerations in Shaping

- Consent and Participation: Learners should not be shaped toward behaviors they have not consented to or that are culturally inappropriate.
- Respecting Frustration Thresholds: Ensure the shaping process remains encouraging.
- Value of the Reinforcer: Use reinforcers that are meaningful to the learner.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Shaping

1. Define the terminal behavior.
2. Observe and identify the learner's current capabilities.
3. Determine the first approximation.
4. Identify meaningful reinforcers.
5. Reinforce the first approximation consistently.
6. Establish clear criteria for the next step.
7. Shift reinforcement only to the new approximation.
8. Repeat until the terminal behavior is established.
9. Maintain the terminal behavior through reinforcement in natural settings.
10. Monitor data continuously to inform each shift in criterion.

Conclusion

Shaping is not merely a mechanical procedure-it is a responsive, evidence-based dialogue between the practitioner and the learner. It embodies the scientific precision of behavior analysis with the empathy and adaptability central to Positive Behavior Support. When executed well, shaping empowers learners to acquire behaviors they may never have achieved otherwise, enhancing autonomy, communication, and engagement with the world.