HUNTING GAMES – THE FOUNDATIONS

💡 Successful Shaping

Teaching your dog a new behaviour in small increments is a fun and errorless way.

💡 Why This Matters

To increase understanding and lower frustration, it is important to structure your sessions, break the goal behaviour down into small increments and respond to your dog's feedback.
When we start shaping for the first time, it can be very tempting to "coach" our dog to engage or call them back when they have left work. Instead, we should ask ourselves a few questions:

- "Are my reinforcements high enough?"
- "Is my reinforcement rate high enough?"
- "Have I given my dog clear clues of what is wanted?"
- "Have my dog's basic needs been met?"
- "Have I broken down the behaviour enough for clarity and understanding?"
- "Is my training environment free of unnecessary distractions?"
- "Was the session too long?"

Below you will find eight checklists to go through before starting your sessions.

💡 Pre-Training Setup Checklists

1. Shaping Goal

Today's Training Goal is: _____

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2. Environment Setup

Prevent chaos so your dog can begin to learn without processing the environment first.

- ☐ Space appropriate for the skill (e.g. size)
- ☐ Room setup with barriers (if needed)
- ☐ Toys, smells, other competing reinforcers removed
- ☐ Surface appropriate (e.g. traction, safety, familiarity)
- ☐ Distraction level intentionally chosen
- ☐ Good lightning, clear visibility for your observations
- ☐ Camera positioned for best view
- ☐ Your position planned (e.g. sitting, standing, kneeling)
- ☐ Equipment for above available if needed (e.g. stool, soft pad)

3. Reinforcements – choose with intention

Value of reinforcement is appropriate for the level of challenge and your dog's stage of learning.

- ☐ Primary reinforcement selected
  - Food
  - Toy
  - Mixed
- ☐ Value levels available (at least 2 from medium – very high)
- ☐ Reinforcement delivery planned
  - From hand
  - Toss
  - Throw
  - Roll
  - Release towards
- ☐ Reinforcement placement planned (where will the dog end?)

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Ideas for Reinforcement options (choose only what you need)

- ☐ Tug toy (from hand/dragging/chasing)
- ☐ Throw toy
- ☐ Release to toy on ground
- ☐ Food toy
- ☐ Visible treats (e.g. light coloured)
- ☐ Contrast treats (e.g. dark coloured)
- ☐ High value food from bowls on the ground
- ☐ Remote feeder

4. Props – only what contributes to clarity

Should simplify decisions, not create new distractions.

- ☐ Primary prop – starting point
  - Hot Zone
  - Crate
  - Platform
- ☐ Secondary Prop – makes success obvious
  - Target mat / dog bed
  - another platform
  - cone
  - perch
  - plank
  - equipment for the skill (e.g. agility obstacles)

- ☐ Any other unnecessary props removed

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5. Equipment

- ☐ Marker system (e.g. clicker, LSM)
- ☐ LSM defined for this session (e.g. meaning, location)
- ☐ Treat pouch / pockets filled & ready
- ☐ Treat bowls / small food bowls
- ☐ Session length defined (timer set)
- ☐ Video recording ready
- ☐ Journal available for data collection
- ☐ Remote feeder (if used)
- ☐ 2m Leash & collar (if used)
- ☐ Long line (if used)

6. Criteria & Plan (Define success non-negotiable)

If criteria have not been defined clearly and you attempt to train, your dog will most likely become frustrated.

- ☐ First reinforcement criteria defined
- ☐ Next 1 – 2 responses identified
- ☐ Reinforcement rate set (high for acquisition)
- ☐ Criteria (one sentence): _____

7. Dog Ready

- ☐ Basic needs met (e.g. toilet, not stressed, not sore, not fatigue)
- ☐ Arousal level appropriate for behaviour goal
- ☐ Dog is engaged and offering responses
- ☐ Start with a game to build appropriate arousal level

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8. Human Ready

A lack of focus from your dog is feedback on the antecedent arrangement you've put in front of them.

- ☐ Clear on criteria
- ☐ Emotionally neutral and patient (right headspace)
- ☐ Focused on observation over drive for a specific outcome
- ☐ Flexible to adjust based on dog's feedback
  - Push (4 out of 5 correct)
  - Stick (3 out of 5 correct)
  - Drop (less than 3 out of 5 correct)

💡 Final Check

Your Shaping Framework

- Define criteria (success)
- Execute with intention (responses & reinforcement rate)
- Protect quality over quantity

- ☐ What earns reinforcement first?
- ☐ Where will my reinforcement be delivered/land?
- ☐ I will be learning from my dog as I teach as only they know what is being reinforced

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