



Shape for Confidence

by Terry Long, CPDT

This is the story of Kippy, a female Coton de Tulear, and her journey from wallflower to center-stage trickster. It is also the story of how clicker-based shaping can be used to help dogs overcome their fears and why this hands-off training technique is especially suited for working with extremely shy dogs.

A frequent criticism from some people is that clicker trainers never touch their dogs. It is not my intent here to dispute that myth; rather, by sharing my experience with Kippy, I hope to demonstrate how a hands-off training technique that relies upon shaping can be very apropos in cases where touching the dog would be aversive and, as a result, delay training progress. In Kippy's case, my training partner, Nikki Myers, CPDT, and I chose not to spend time desensitizing and counterconditioning Kippy to a trainer's proximity and touch *before* beginning training. Instead, we used shaping to begin training immediately. We knew Kippy would benefit from classical conditioning taking place during the normal course of our training sessions simply by the pairing of treats with the presence of the trainers.

History

When we first met her, Kippy was 18 months of age. She attended doggy daycare several days a week along with her eight-month-old

Coton housemate Kosmo. We met at the Long Beach-based doggy daycare, The Pet Set, where Nikki and I were invited by the owners of the facility to run a doggy day school program. The program is designed to teach basic manners to enrollees while their owners are at work. Kippy's owner, Lynne Craig, ran a busy catering business and wanted to enroll both dogs in the day school program.



Kippy and Kosmo

During my interview with Lynne, I found that she had purchased Kippy from a rural East Coast breeder and had her shipped cross-country to her new home in megalopolis Southern California at the age of 12 weeks. Kippy had a history from the beginning of being shy with new people, places, and things. Kosmo had been purchased locally and brought home at ten weeks of age and had always been outgoing and feisty.

Lynne's goals for Kippy and Kosmo were walking on a leash (they had never been leash trained), and tricks. "Yes, tricks," she said,

"I want them to have fun." Only my professionalism kept me from leaping out of my chair, kissing my new client and dancing her across the daycare lobby using clickers as my castanets. After many years of clients telling me "I don't want any silly tricks, I just want my dog to behave," I was ecstatic. I am a firm believer that teaching tricks is one of the best ways for dogs to learn to offer behaviors from which the trainer can select.

When the daycare staff brought Kippy and Kosmo to the lobby after the interview, Lynne grabbed Kippy into her arms for hugs and smooches while Kosmo danced around the lobby, running up to everyone there, outgoing and quite the social butterfly. Both dogs were absolutely irresistible and would soon have a variety of nicknames, including "the white fluff balls," "K&K," and "the Daring Duo." I couldn't wait to get started with the training.

Benched

Lynne had chosen 30-minute training sessions three times a week. We would split the half-hour between the two dogs. When I arrived for the first training session, I retrieved the container of pre-cut Dick Van Patten Natural Balance®, as well as the dogs' harnesses and leashes that Lynne had left per my instructions, while the daycare staff brought Kosmo to the lobby. He took to the training like a fish

to water, quickly learning that his behavior is what elicited the click and then the treat.

Kippy, on the other hand, ran away from me if I didn't have her on a leash and submissively urinated when I picked her up. The problem was that since she had never really been on a leash before, a leash was aversive to her and made her panic. I decided to let Kippy sit nearby on a large high-backed bench while I worked with Kosmo. Several times during each training session with Kosmo, I would briefly go over to Kippy and give her treats, which she loved. After one or two sessions of eating treats, I sat on the edge of the bench and offered my finger for inspection. She tentatively leaned forward, and I verbally marked ("Yes!") and rewarded. (We don't use a clicker in the early stages of training fearful dogs. We have found many of them have a heightened startle response and are afraid of the clicker, possibly transferring their fear of the new person to this novel sound, as well.)

After two weeks, Kippy was still on the bench. Although she was comfortable with finger targeting, she was still avoiding me if I leaned toward her, and she still urinated when I picked her up. Meanwhile, Kosmo had learned to sit, down, walk nicely on a leash, and spin on cue. He was his momma's shining star. Lynne had adjusted her expectations of Kippy, assuming we would be lucky to get Kippy acclimated to a leash, if anything.

Floored

One day, I set Kippy on the floor next to Kosmo, hoping that she

would now be comfortable enough with me not to run away, and that I would get some benefit from social facilitation. That is, if her housemate was getting all those treats, how was he doing it?

It worked! She was able to finger target on the floor even though she would still avoid any movement initiated toward her. I decided to simply click *anything* that she did. This included backing away from me, looking up at me, jumping on her hind legs to try and grab Kosmo's cookie, and barking. She soon knew that she could do just about anything to get clicked. She soon became very creative in her

"I am a firm believer that teaching tricks is one of the best ways for dogs to learn to offer behaviors from which the trainer can select."

efforts to get clicked.

Each session now started with both dogs working together, and then I would put Kippy back on her bench so that I could concentrate on Kosmo. One day, after putting Kippy on her bench, I returned to work with Kosmo only to find that Kippy had *jumped off the bench* to join in the fun, pushing her way in front of Kosmo for the treats. This was a huge milestone!!!! From that day, Kippy would not be left out of the training game. If you put her on the bench, quick as a bunny she'd hop down and prance around, vying for attention.

After that, we were able to split the half-hour training session between the two dogs, Kippy now perfectly happy to work one on one without Kosmo there. I also had

Nikki start working with both dogs. Kippy quickly learned that she could "operate" Nikki as well.

Shaping for Bravery

Kippy was a veritable gold mine of behaviors. She was a clicker trainer's dream: lots of behaviors, one after the other, just waiting to be split apart, chained, and put on cue. She would jump, hop, toss her head, spin, bark, and bow—all within a second or two. Although we couldn't resist shaping a variety of tricks (see Sidebar, "Kippy's Repertoire"), there were three behaviors that helped Kippy the most: 1) back up; 2) relaxed down; and 3) check it.

Back up: Kippy frequently backed away from people since she was not comfortable being closer than about three feet. We decided to change that from a learned avoidance behavior to one positively reinforced and put on cue. We simply clicked as soon as she twitched a muscle backing up. When she realized that backing up was a bankable behavior, her backup soon came with a gleam in the eye instead of her previous wary look. Along the way, we captured a very cute head toss. Now, instead of trying to shrink into the background, Kippy seemed to be saying, "Hey, look at me do this!" It became one of her most frequently offered behaviors that delighted the people she would be entertaining in the future.

Relaxed down: Kippy appeared happy offering behaviors, but if we stopped training to make notes or talk to someone, she became nervous and didn't know what to do. She would stand or warily wander around, still staying out of

reach. We needed to teach her an incompatible behavior, and one that would help her relax. Down was the obvious choice, but she *never* offered a down, and she was still nervous about someone getting too close to her so luring wasn't an option. Nikki successfully elicited this behavior one day by sitting on the floor, her back against a wall, with legs straight out in front of her. She took slow, deep breaths, exhaling fully and slowly, relaxing all of her own muscles. After a few minutes, Kippy lay down. Click, treat! An interesting side effect of this method of capturing a down was that Kippy would down only if you sat on the floor and exhaled. We joked that the cue would be exhalation alone once we desensitized her to our body position. (Later, we did successfully add both a verbal and a hand signal.)

Check it: One of the most helpful cues we taught Kippy was "Check it!," a cue I teach dogs who are fearful of new objects in the environment. It is taught using basic target training, i.e., touching a nose to something. We introduced a target stick, holding it in our hand. Not surprisingly, she was afraid of it. We placed it on the floor, and gradually shaped the behavior, first clicking for anything other than looking away from it, until she would glance at it, look at it, sniff toward it, take a step closer, etc., until she was touching her nose to it. We then added the cue ("Check it!"). Next, we introduced new objects such as picture frames on the floor (what's *that* doing there?!?), trashcans, grooming tools, hoola hoops, etc. Later, when we noticed that she was afraid of something, we simply cued "Check it!" and she immediately would try and

overcome her fear of the item, stepping closer and closer to it, eventually investigating it. The combination of classical and operant conditioning used in the training process transferred nicely to new scary things with this cue.

Moving Challenges

The most difficult behaviors for Kippy were those that involved moving objects. One of the daycare staff's favorite tricks was "Let us pray!" performed by my dog, Kiwi. It involves teaching the dog to put his paws up on an object and then tucking his chin between his paws. I really wanted to teach it to Kippy and Kosmo since I knew it would be so cute if they could do it together. Kosmo learned it quickly, while Kippy was always concerned that the little stool we used would move. Any inadvertent movement could set us back days in training time. Our "Check It" cue helped accelerate past some of these bumps in the training plan, but extra care was always given to making sure the stool didn't move when she got brave enough to place a paw on it.

And in some cases, the environment itself was a challenge. For example, if she was just getting bold enough to touch her nose to a new object, and someone slammed a door, she would startle and jump away as if the object burned her. However, improved bounce-back was part of our goal with Kippy. That is, could we, over time, give her enough practice in overcoming these fears and setbacks that her ability to "bounce back" from startling events became better and better. In some cases, this worked

Kippy's Repertoire

- Sit
- Down
- Close (walk on a leash)
- Check it
- Say Please (bark on cue)
- Chin (place chin on the floor)
- Hoop (jump through the hoola-hoop)
- Come
- Here (touch nose to hand)
- Scoot (scoot backwards, butt in air)
- Let Us Pray
- Settle (on a mat)
- Score! (fling a foam ball through the air, up and over her shoulder)
- Hip Hop (back up)
- Wait

and in others, it didn't. If she had a longer history of interaction with an object before that door slammed, she would bounce back more quickly. If not, it could take several additional training sessions to get back to where we had started when the startling event occurred. Overall, we were pleased with her steady progress in this area. In those early wallflower days, she would "shut down," and we would have to end her training session for the day. That rarely happened as we progressed with her training.

A Star is Shaped

Several weeks after Kippy gave up her wallflower status on the bench, we had to move our training to a small area away from the lobby ... we simply were drawing too much attention. We couldn't go more than a few minutes without someone coming over to ask how we were doing what we were doing

or simply exclaiming about the Daring Duo's feats.

Lynne was thrilled with both her dogs' progress, but Nikki and I have always been most pleased with Kippy's transformation. We know how difficult it is for dogs to overcome fears and what a rare opportunity we were given to play a role in helping Kippy become more confident and outgoing.

After about six months of training, Kippy and Kosmo were coming along quite well. Kippy's overall confidence level with new people had improved, and her owner was delighted.

Kippy's performance debut came at the Daring Duo's joint birthday party where Kippy—in a lobby jammed with daycare staff and Lynne's friends and family—executed synchronized spins with her brother. Her hip-hop back up—complete with her trademark sassy head toss and gleam in her eye—said it all. Wallflower no more. Center Stage for Miss Kippy.

*Terry Long, CPDT, is a professional writer, dog trainer, and behavior counselor in Long Beach, CA. She is the Editor of the "On Behavior" column and is the former managing editor of **The APDT Chronicle of the Dog**. She authors **Dog World's** "About Agility" column. She can be reached through her Web site at www.dogpact.com.*

This article was first published in the March/April 2006 The APDT Chronicle of the Dog. Copyright 2006 The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, www.apdt.com, 1-800-PET-DOGS.