Training

How to Teach a Dog to Shake (Paw)

Shaking hands – offering a polite paw – is one of the most popular and endearing tricks in the dog world. And it's easy to teach your dog!

By **Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA** - **Published:** August 14, 2023 0



It's usually very easy to teach "Shake" to dogs like Boone, who are naturally "pawsy." In this case, the photographer worked as a team with her grandson, Oliver. He gave the physical cues (holding out his hand) and she used a verbal marker ("Yes!") when Boone lifted his foot. This prompted Oliver to deliver the treat to Boone. Photos by Nancy Kerns.

Several training techniques can be used to teach a dog to "Shake hands." Here are four methods for teaching this amusing trick – capturing, shaping, lure-shaping, and prompting. Different dogs may respond better to one method than another; you should use whichever training method works best for your dog. We will describe which method

tends to work best with dogs with different behavioral tendencies. Here's how to use each of these training techniques to teach your dog to "give a paw" on cue:

"Capture" the Paw Lift

Some dogs are naturally "pawsy," often using their feet to touch you or objects they are playing with. These are the easiest to teach to shake.If this describes your dog, try this method:

1. Just hang out with your dog (it's best if she's sitting) and wait for her to lift a paw.
2. When she does, "mark" this behavior with the click of a clicker (or other reward marker, such as a "thumbs-up" hand signal or a verbal marker such as "Yes!") and give her a treat.
3. Repeat by marking any lifts of that same paw (chose left or right – but not both!) until your dog realizes she's getting reinforced for the paw lift, and then add your "Shake" cue just *before* she lifts her paw. With enough repetitions she'll offer her paw even every time you cue her to "Shake."
4. Now start offering your hand so she can rest her paw on it for your final shake behavior.



At first, the team "captured" Boone's behavior of shifting his weight, by using the verbal marker ("Yes!") and giving him a treat when one of his front paws moved. Then, they raised the criteria, waiting for him to lift a paw off the ground before marking and giving him a treat. Because he's been trained with these methods before, Boone knew to keep offering various behaviors as he worked to find what would result in a Yes! and treat. Within just a few tries, Boone waved his paw in the air. Yes! and Jackpot!

“Shape” the Shake

Shaping shake works well for dogs who move their feet often while otherwise sitting still, but don’t raise a paw high enough to shake. If this describes your dog, try this method:

1. Start by having your dog sitting in front of you. The instant you see a tiny movement with either foot, mark the behavior and feed her a treat.
2. Now focus on that paw only (if you randomly mark the movement of either paw you may get a shuffle instead of a shake!) and continue to mark and treat for any paw movement.
3. As your dog starts to move that foot on purpose in anticipation of reinforcement, very gradually raise the criteria you require in order to mark and treat. For example, only mark-treat if the paw moves at least one inch off the floor. When that happens consistently, raise the criteria to two inches. Continue raising the criteria slowly, add your cue, and you’re off and shaking!



Then the team raised criteria again: They waited for Boone to touch Oliver’s hand with his paw, or, in this case, his paw and wrist. No worries! It’s a closer approximation of the desired behavior, so he gets a “Yes!” and treat. Then they raise criteria again, waiting for him to more precisely put his paw in Oliver’s hand.

“Lure-Shape” the Shake

If your dog sits perfectly still with no paw movement at all, try this method, lure-shaping the paw lift.

1. Hold a treat at the end of her nose and slowly lift it until her nose is pointed almost straight up. Now move the treat slowly to one side so she shifts her weight onto one foot and the other paw lifts slightly. Mark and treat.
2. Repeat until the paw lift gets easier and she starts to offer paw movement without the lure, then continue as described in the shaping section, luring if needed while you raise criteria. Fade your lure as quickly as possible so that you can get your "Shake" on verbal cue.



When shaping, the dog will try a few behaviors, in an effort to discover which behavior gets the treat. It's important to not mark and treat efforts that take him farther from the behavior you want. In this case, Boone tried putting both his paw and his nose on Oliver's hand. The team didn't say "No" or discourage him; they just waited for a closer approximation of what they were after.

"Prompting" the Paw

If the above-mentioned methods fail, you can *prompt* your dog to move her paw. We would rarely start teaching a behavior using a physical prompt, as dogs tend to learn best when their freely offered behaviors are marked and rewarded, rather than when they are pressured by a physical touch. However, some dogs are reluctant to offer behaviors (perhaps from being physically punished or intimidated for offering behaviors in the past); these dogs may benefit from a *very* gentle prompt.

1. Start by by lightly tickling or pressing gently on your dog's pastern (the back of her ankle).
2. Mark and treat the moment her paw moves! Good girl!
3. Repeat until she starts to *offer* paw movement as you reach toward her paw – and if she does, don't follow through with the prompt, but mark and treat for the movement. Then switch to shaping or lure-shaping as described above to get to your final paw-shaking goal.

Boone learned to touch the bellman's bell within a minute of learning "shake" and high-five.

Paw Targeting

When your dog has learned that moving her paw earns treats, she can teach learn how to do other things with her feet. Teach her to touch her paw to a designated object to ring a bell, turn on a light, push a rolling toy – and these fun behaviors are just the beginning. Have more fun with your dog's paws!

Once you've taught your dog to touch something with his foot, it's easy to teach more behaviors, such as giving a high-five or simply waving his paw in the air.

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Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, grew up in a family that was blessed with lots of animal companions: dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, goats, and more, and has maintained that model ever since. She spent the first 20 years of her professional life working at the Marin Humane Society in Marin County, California, for most of that time as a humane officer and director of operations. She continually studied the art and science of dog training and behavior during that time, and in 1996, left MHS to start her own training and behavior business, Peaceable Paws. Pat has earned a number of titles from various training organizations, including Certified Behavior Consultant Canine-Knowledge Assessed (CBCC-KA) and Certified Professional Dog Trainer - Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA). She also founded Peaceable Paws Academies for teaching and credentialing dog training and behavior professionals, who can earn "Pat Miller Certified Trainer" certifications. She and her husband Paul and an ever-changing number of dogs, horses, and other animal companions live on their 80-acre farm in Fairplay, Maryland.

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