

If the experimenter
may take the kitten's
paws



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If an animal or a human being is left by itself to learn something, then learning could be slow. But if the process of shaping is used, learning can be more rapid. Shaping is a process in which the animal's behaviour is manipulated step by step and it is made to learn the desired behaviour. In this procedure, the experimenter first reinforces the responses which are more similar to the desired response.

Since each step that could ultimately lead to the desired response is reinforced, this method is also known as the method of successive approximations. Let us see, how this is done? At first a kitten may be placed in a Skinner box and allowed to become familiar with it. The next step would be to give some food pellets to the kitten. Then, the shaping of the lever response begins. Whenever the kitten happens to go near the lever the experimenter presses a switch releasing the food pellet. This is supposed to reinforce its behaviour of going towards the lever.

In the next step, the experimenter reinforces the kitten only if it touches the lever or the experimenter may take the kitten's paws and press it against the lever far enough for the food dispenser to release a food pellet. Thus, the lever pressing response is established and the shaping is complete. A large part of our behaviour is due to shaping. Our attitudes, values, customs, beliefs and even our language are due to shaping.

The method of shaping has been used in humans as well as animals. Among animals, it has been used to teach chickens to 'play' a toy piano, to teach basket-ball to rabbits and to play a ping-pong to pigeon.