

Shaping

Shaping is a powerful behavioural strategy used frequently in special education, especially for students with severe disabilities. It is based on the principles of **Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)** and involves reinforcing successive approximations of a target behaviour or skill until the desired behaviour is achieved.

What Is Shaping?

Definition:

Shaping is the process of teaching a new behaviour by **reinforcing small steps** that lead toward the desired behaviour. Instead of waiting for the complete behaviour to occur, the teacher reinforces **incremental improvements** or **closer approximations**.

This is particularly useful when a student is **unable to perform the full behaviour independently** and needs structured support to get there.

How Shaping Works

- Define the terminal behaviour – clearly describe what the final desired behaviour looks like.
- Identify the baseline – assess the student's current behaviour.
- Break the terminal behaviour into manageable steps.
- Reinforce each step – provide positive reinforcement (praise, tokens, preferred items) when the student achieves a closer approximation.
- Gradually increase criteria – once one step is mastered, reinforcement is only given for the next, more complex step.
- Continue until the terminal behaviour is achieved.

Classroom Example

Skill: Raising a hand to answer a question

Student's current behaviour: Calling out answers impulsively

Shaping process:

Step 1: Student waits quietly for 3 seconds before calling out → Reinforce

Step 2: Student raises hand briefly and calls out → Reinforce

Step 3: Student raises hand and waits to be called on → Reinforce

Step 4: Student consistently raises hand and waits quietly → Only this is reinforced now

Tools: Use of verbal praise ("Great job waiting!"), sticker charts, or a token economy.

Playground Example

Skill: Joining a group game (e.g., kicking a soccer ball with peers)

Student's current behaviour: Playing alone or avoiding peers

Shaping process:

Step 1: Student observes the group play from a distance → Reinforce

Step 2: Student moves closer to the game → Reinforce

Step 3: Student stands near and watches quietly → Reinforce

Step 4: Student approaches a peer and passes the ball once → Reinforce

Step 5: Student kicks the ball and engages in a short game → Reinforce

Eventually, the student learns to **initiate and sustain peer interaction** in the game.

Key Considerations

Reinforcement must be immediate and meaningful for the student.

Pacing is individualised – some students may need more time at certain steps.

Avoid moving to the next step **too quickly**; ensure the student is successful first.

Data tracking helps to monitor progress and decide when to increase expectations.

Benefits of Shaping for Students with Severe Disabilities

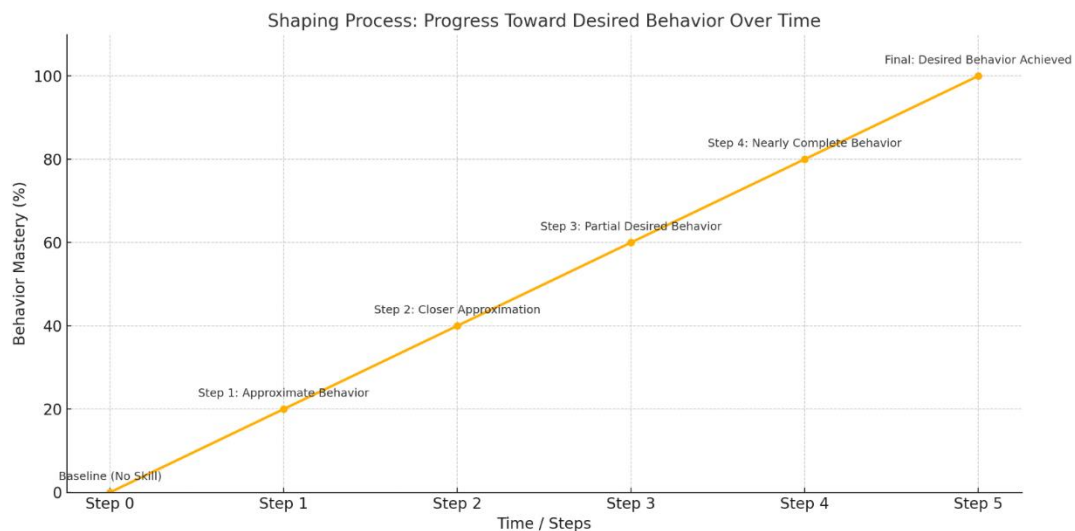
Enables learning of complex or unfamiliar behaviours in manageable steps.

Builds confidence and reduces anxiety or frustration.

Supports functional and social skill development.

Encourages independence and engagement in both academic and social settings.

Shaping Process: Progress Toward Desired Behaviour Over Time



Here is a visual representation of the **shaping process** over time:

- The horizontal axis shows each **step** in the shaping process.
- The vertical axis reflects the **level of behaviour mastery**, from 0% (no skill) to 100% (desired behaviour fully achieved).
- Each point marks a significant **approximation** of the target behaviour, gradually progressing through reinforcement.

This helps illustrate how shaping builds success gradually and systematically, providing structure and support for students with severe disabilities to learn new behaviours. Let me know if you'd like a printable version or one tailored to a specific skill area.