

# Behavior and Training

## Summary and Resources

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) uses the science of behavior, operant learning principles studied in the laboratory, to understand and change behavior in the everyday setting. This class strives to give us the basis to begin using the tools of ABA, particularly positive reinforcement, to interact with our parrots. But in two hours, we barely scratch the surface. Please delve into some of the resources listed at the end to learn more about this powerful approach to learning that is grounded in the ability to choose.

### Some Training Fundamentals

(With sincere thanks and attribution for the ideas to Steve Martin)

Our training goal is to set up the parrot's environment to make it easy for the parrot to do behaviors we prefer and, to the extent we control the feedback, to make the consequences of the behaviors we like valuable to the parrot, so that it chooses to repeat those behaviors; the parrot chooses to do the things we want. In all of our interactions with our parrots teaching and learning is happening even when we are not focusing on it and we are training each other.

*Relationships and responsibility:* A relationship that fosters trust, built on honesty and respect, is critical. As a strong history of positive interactions is built up (think about it as deposits in a bank account) the parrot approaches the trainer with interest and willingness to learn.

The trainer is responsible for the parrot's behavior and learning. In order to succeed, the trainer needs to develop and implement plans that set up the parrot's environment to make desired behavior easier – “setting up the environment for success.” Then give the parrot something it values (a positive reinforcer or reward) after a desired behavior so the parrot will have a reason to repeat the behavior. Blaming the bird for not doing what we ask, using labels such as “lazy,” “hormonal,” “dominant,” isn't useful and is often an excuse to stop trying.

*Communication:* It's a two way street. Observe the parrot. What is the parrot telling me? Learning a parrot's body language, feather and body position, eyes, grip, gives insight into the way the parrot is likely to behave at that moment in the current environment.

Give clear messages to the parrot. What am I telling the parrot? Give the parrot consistent prompts or cues (signals) for the behavior being requested. When the parrot performs the behavior, immediately tell the parrot that this is what you want and follow with a reinforcer. We tell the parrot by giving a signal or marker at the exact time the behavior is performed. This is referred to as a bridge and can be a click, a whistle, a word such as “good.” We then give the parrot a reinforcer. The parrot learns that when the bridge is given the reinforcer always follows: the bridge is a promise to pay.

*Power to the parrot:* Successful learning is based on choice and empowerment. Give the parrot power to shape our actions. If the parrot's body language tells us we are too close, back up. Learn signs that tell whether the parrot is willing to engage in a behavior and respect them. For example, rather than presenting a hand at the parrot's feet to ask for a step up, show the hand at a little

distance and watch for information that communicates willingness. Maybe a raised foot, a slight bend forward, a tilt of the head? Each bird will be different. But I wouldn't extend my hand to any bird that reached toward my hand with a wide-open beak!

Give the parrot power to choose. Sometimes a parrot shows no interest in a training session. Learn to recognize the signs, respect them and come back another time. The ability to choose to return to a place of comfort is reinforcing when some new behaviors are taught. For example, a parrot will learn to go into a crate more reliably if the parrot is allowed to step in and out, have the door closed, then opened right away repeatedly (all accompanied by reinforcers) rather than lured in and have the door shut and locked.

Give the parrot the power to escape. Allowing the parrot to move away, to return to a cage or leave a training area (all in a safely enclosed space, of course) reduces fear and aggressive behaviors that may otherwise result.

*Motivation; What's in it for me?* Why should a parrot do what we ask? A number of factors influence motivation. Reinforcers: a parrot learns that if it performs the requested behavior then it will be given something it values: a favorite food, a head scratch, a special toy, praise. The value of a given reinforcer can change so variety is important. Training duration influences motivation. It is important to know a parrot's attention span (and learn to recognize signs that it is waning) so the session can be ended while successful. The ease of the task requested is important. It may be hard for a parrot to do a new behavior. Willingness to try can be increased by clear information from the trainer and starting with smaller steps that are easier for the parrot to perform. A most important factor is the relationship between the trainer and the parrot. A parrot will be motivated to work with a trainer if the relationship is founded on a history of positive interactions, in which the trainer honors the promises made, listens to and respects what the parrot says.

### Some Science Basics

(With sincere thanks - and apologies for all that is left out – to Susan Friedman)

Behavior is everything an animal does that can be observed, described and measured. Behavior is always occurring like the filling of a sandwich between slices of environmental stimuli. Environmental conditions, events, stimuli, that immediately precede the behavior and function to set the occasion for or facilitate the behavior are called antecedents. Antecedents predict whether a particular behavior is likely to occur. Behavior has function, a purpose. The consequences of behavior are the stimuli – events or conditions – that occur immediately after and are related to a behavior. Consequences can be understood as feedback delivered by the environment. In the future, a behavior will either increase, be maintained, decrease, or disappear depending on the consequence, or what happens immediately after the behavior is performed. A feedback that is valued will maintain or increase a behavior; a feedback that an animal does not want to experience again will tend to decrease the behavior. However, because of the very serious detrimental side effects, the intentional use of aversives (things the parrot tries to avoid) is not wise or humane and is not recommended.

Understanding the environment that facilitates a behavior and the purpose or function of a behavior is the first step. The smallest meaningful unit of behavior, one can analyze is referred to as the ABCs: antecedent, behavior, consequence. A process called functional assessment enables us to understand the environmental stimuli that are functionally related to a specific behavior: A – the environment before that facilitates the behavior and C – the environment after that gives the bird feedback, so we can make predictions about the behavior reoccurring. We can also change the behavior, if we want to, by changing the antecedents and/or the consequences.

We begin by identifying, carefully observing and describing the behavior (B), referred to as the “target behavior,” that we want to understand and maybe change. Next we identify the environmental conditions/events that occur immediately before the behavior (A) that predict or facilitate the behavior and those that occur immediately after (C) that give feedback and affect the future occurrence of the target behavior. Then we make a guess/prediction about the probable future behavior (PFB) if no changes are made to A or C. Experience guides us in making predictions of PFB. Observation of future behavior under the same conditions will tell us if the prediction is correct.

If we like the behavior, we can strengthen it by continuing to reinforce it. If do not want the behavior to continue, we can develop a plan to change the A or C or both. This process allows us to decrease an unwanted behavior using the principles of positive reinforcement. Once we understand the conditions that set the occasion for or facilitate the behavior we can change the conditions to make the behavior harder or less inviting. Identifying the function or purpose of the behavior, the consequence that reinforces it, we can, if possible, remove that consequence.

Excessive screaming is a problem for many parrot caregivers. Screaming is complex (far too complex to be addressed properly in a few sentences) because it is a natural behavior and performs many functions: a contact call, an alarm signal, a plea for attention, to name a few. To simplify, if the screaming occurs after something happens that we can control, remove it from the environment. Unfortunately we can't remove the telephone, the door bell or strange cars in the driveway, events that often result in loud screams. If the purpose of screaming is to get our attention, we do not want to respond to the screams. But we can reinforce quiet: visit the parrot with great enthusiasm, give a treat, a toy, a scratch when the parrot is quiet; and reinforce a different behavior that serves the same purpose for the parrot. Teach your parrot that you will appear and give attention when the parrot makes an acceptable sound – a whistle, “hello,” a click of the beak.

How do we teach a new behavior? We can't reinforce a behavior that doesn't occur. We can capture a behavior. To capture a behavior we observe closely and when we see a behavior we want repeated, bridge (communicate that the behavior is one that will result in a reinforcer) then give the reinforcer. Shaping is a tool that lets us mold a parrot's behavior in small steps called approximations from a behavior a parrot already performs to the final behavior we want. The science and strategies of shaping are deserve a lesson in themselves to provide a clear understanding. To simplify, let's say we want our parrot to wave. The parrot raises its foot ever so slightly when we approach the perch. Think about the small changes that can lead to the wave we want. Start by reinforcing that small movement. Then wait until the parrot raises it foot a bit higher. Reinforce that bigger raise and continue until the parrot raises its foot to the height you want.

This discussion is an attempt to provide insights into the science of behavior that will help us work with our parrots, everyday, in a positive and effective manner. I hope this discussion will lead you to delve further into the body of the knowledge that is the science of behavior and the art of training.

### Recommended Resources

Information about Susan Friedman's awesome translation of the science of behavior for parrot caregivers can be found at: <http://behaviorworks.org/> This website introduces and give links to Susan Freidman's materials, including Parrot Behavior Analysis Solutions, a yahoo group the address of which is: <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/ParrotBAS/>). The group operates in a structured way, provides thread leaders to help solve specific problems; the files section includes valuable in depth articles about many issues, including a new article about screaming; "S -files" that show how some problems were successfully resolve; and offers on line "mini-lessons." *Living and Learning with Parrots*, Susan Freidman's 8 week on line course, has a waiting time of more than a year but is well worth the wait.

Information by and about Steve Martin, founder of Natural Encounter's Inc, and master of the art of animal training can be found at: <http://www.naturalencounters.com/> . You will find great articles at: <http://www.naturalencounters.com/pressRoom.html> and more helpful information at: <http://www.naturalencounters.com/trainingEducationQA.html>. The week long workshops held in Florida include hands on experience with great coaches looking over your shoulder.

### Books:

*Clicker Training for Birds* by Melinda Johnson

*Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavioral Problems in Companion Parrots* by Barbara Heidenreich

*Don't Shoot the Dog* by Karen Pryor

*The Parrot Problem Solver* by Barbara Heidenreich

*The Click That Does the Trick* by Robin Deutsch

*Clicking with Birds: A Beginners Guide to Clicker Training* *Your Companion Parrot* by Linda Morrow

(Note: The information in the clicker training books is valuable even if you have 5 left thumbs and can't manage a clicker.)

Magazines: *Goodbird Magazine* ([www.Goodbirdinc.com](http://www.Goodbirdinc.com))

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