

PET Pages

PsittaScene's PET Pages help you provide the very best for your bird by focusing on Parrot behaviour, Enrichment and Training.



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Step Up: Command or Request?

By Barbara Heidenreich, Good Bird Inc

I was asked once "If you could teach people one thing to help them work with their parrots, what it would be?"

Without hesitation I replied, "I think the thing that would make the most difference for the birds would be if their caregivers really learned the difference between the 'Step up' **command** and the 'Step up' **request**."

It has been reiterated for years in the companion parrot literature...your parrot must *obey* the step up *command*. Obey and command. For me these words carry strong implications. I visualize a parrot with no desire to step up

Fallout from force

There can be serious repercussions with lasting effects from using force or aversive stimuli to gain cooperation. One of the most common results of forcing a bird onto your hand is a parrot that learns to bite in response to the presence of a hand (the aversive stimuli). The important word in that sentence is "learns". Parrots are not hatched with an inherent aggressive response to hands. This behavior is learned through repeated exposure to unpleasant interactions involving hands. Often as a last resort, a parrot bites in an effort to deter the persistent pushy hand. Should the bite produce the desired results (the hand going away) the bird



Parrots can learn to bite hands that are used to force behavior.

onto the hand being forced to comply. This force usually involves maneuvers such as pushing a hand into a bird's chest, quickly scooping a bird onto the hand, or peeling toes off of a perch. For a positive reinforcement trainer such as me this is a very unpleasant picture. Why? Certainly those strategies can work to get a bird on the hand. However, the process of training through force involves strategies that rely on aversive experiences. Pushing a hand into a bird's chest, scooping it up or otherwise forcing it onto your hand are uncomfortable experiences for a parrot, no matter how you look at it.

quickly learns that biting works! More importantly, it will be likely to use it next time a hand invades its space.

This is not to say one should ignore a bite to dissuade the aggressive behavior. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say "take the bite" so the bird learns you won't back off. That can be quite painful and very unnecessary! A more trust building approach is to avoid a bite in the first place by heeding the parrot's body language before it considers biting. Typically a parrot will present body language that indicates discomfort well before a bite is landed. By

carefully observing body language and making adjustments so that the bird remains as comfortable as possible, a sensitive trainer can gain cooperation without prompting aggressive behavior.

The same can be said for fear responses. Many of you have met a parrot who will step onto an arm or shoulder, but will do everything in its power to avoid a hand. Again it would be an odd adaptation for a parrot to come into this world with an innate fear of hands. More likely the bird's experience with hands taught it to fear them.

A positive approach

It can be challenging to retrain a parrot to step up onto a hand for positive reinforcement after it has learned aggressive behavior (and/or fear responses) towards hands. The good news is that it can be done. This is particularly important to note as so many birds are often given up, ignored, or worse after being labeled "a biter" through no fault of their own. It is always sad for me to encounter a parrot that has learned aggressive behavior. The bird's experience could be so different if the people in its life had been given the opportunity to learn about positive reinforcement.

Having worked in free flighted educational bird programs for years it was quite a shock when I first discovered the thousands of parrots that had fear responses or showed aggressive behavior towards hands in the companion parrot community. Those training flighted parrots for programs have been raised on a positive reinforcement approach to training. Flighted parrots can easily choose to leave should a trainer resort to negative reinforcement to force a bird to step up onto the hand. Therefore negative reinforcement and its drawbacks are usually not a part of the training strategy.

The companion parrot community, on the other hand, has traditionally been fed advice that heavily promotes the use of negative reinforcement. This in turn has led to a plethora of troubled birds. Fortunately an important opportunity awaits companion parrot caregivers. With positive reinforcement training finally coming to the forefront, parrots and their owners now have hope. No longer do parrots have to obey. Instead they can learn that stepping up results in desired consequences. They can learn to look forward to stepping up!

Positive vs negative

Change can be difficult. Those accustomed to using negative reinforcement to train birds often present solid evidence as to why there is no need to consider other strategies. These arguments include the statement that negative reinforcement works! This is true. Negative reinforcement does work. However, a conscientious caregiver needs to consider more than effectiveness. The process of learning through negative reinforcement is not a pleasant one. Negative reinforcement is also sometimes called escape or harassment training. The animal complies to avoid the aversive experience - not exactly a trust building process. In addition, negative reinforcement training strategies create a bare minimum required response. Animals only do what is necessary to avoid the aversive experience.

There is also the misconception that negative reinforcement will create faster, more reliable responses. It should be noted that quick, efficient, reliable, repeatable responses can also be attained with positive reinforcement.

Some argue that in an emergency the bird must step up quickly. In a true emergency, such as the house is on fire, you do whatever is required to ensure your parrot is safe. The problem is that sometimes the lines get fuzzy on what constitutes an emergency. Being late for work is not an emergency requiring me to abandon my positive reinforcement training strategies. In the long run I will get more reliable performance of

Fallout from forcing parrots to step up

- Many birds now bite as a result of being forced to step up
- Many birds are given up due to biting problems
- Many birds show fear responses to hands and flee to the back of their cages
- Many birds are relegated to cages with little attention or enrichment because they learned to bite or are afraid
- Many birds suffer fates worse than this because they have learned to respond to force with aggressive behavior and/or fear responses



Trainers that work with free-flight birds rarely if ever use negative reinforcement or aversive stimuli to train.



the behavior if I take the time to commit to using positive reinforcement even when it is slightly inconvenient to me. In my experience there is no real justification for the use of negative reinforcement to get a bird to step up.

Give your parrot a choice

A key component of training with positive reinforcement is giving the bird choice. Rather than forcing oneself on the parrot, the goal is to teach the parrot that choosing to come to the caregiver results in desired consequences. These consequences can be food treats, head scratches, toys, attention, etc. Identify what the bird likes and use this to reinforce approximations towards the desired goal behavior of stepping up onto the hand.

An easy way to teach a parrot to move in a desired direction is to train the bird to orient its beak towards a target. The target can be any chosen object. The target can then be gradually positioned closer and closer to the hand identified for the step up behavior. The hand should remain stationary and in a position that allows the bird to step on easily. The goal is not to move the hand towards the bird, but for the bird to voluntarily move toward the hand by following the target.

A bird that has an unpleasant history with hands may show signs of apprehension or aggressive behavior as it ventures closer to the hand. Generously reinforce the frightened bird that dares to move in closer. If it shows aggressive behavior, gently remove the hand and any positive reinforcers for just a few seconds. This shows the bird that its body language was understood and acknowledged. It also removes the opportunity to gain positive reinforcers. When this strategy is paired with reinforcement of the desired behavior (stepping closer to the hand), the bird can quickly learn to increase calm behavior and decrease aggressive behavior



Using positive reinforcement to train your bird to voluntarily step up builds trust and understanding.

without the use of aversives. Over time the bird will be reinforced for moving closer and closer to the hand. When it touches or maybe even raises a tentative foot towards your hand it can be praised and reinforced generously. Eventually, through this process, the parrot can learn to voluntarily step up onto the hand to earn positive reinforcers.

While the bird is learning to step up, you can use the targeting behavior to help direct the parrot



for basic husbandry duties. This helps you avoid resorting back to negative reinforcement training strategies to move your bird during the re-training process.

Conclusion

Ultimately we all want what is best for our parrots. We also hope to have an incredibly rewarding relationship that is truly one of the joys of sharing your life with a companion animal. The result of training your parrot using positive reinforcement is a bird that eagerly anticipates interacting with you. Empowering your parrot with the opportunity to choose and showing sensitivity to its behavior will foster trust. A great place to start in building that relationship based on trust is by training "step up" using positive reinforcement. If there is one thing you change in your handling strategy, make it this. Move over step up **command**...here comes the step up **request**.

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