



Medical Center For Birds

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Foundation Behaviors

Parrots and many other bird species are exceptionally social animals. Like the other animal companions we keep in our lives, it is very important to teach a few “foundation behaviors”. Foundation behaviors can be anything that you chose, as these details often will vary from household to household—although there still is often common ground that can apply to most. Try to imagine what behaviors are acceptable (for you) from your bird and what activities you will be doing with your bird regularly; these are behaviors that you want to teach and continually reinforce with your birds. We have listed below target training, stepping up, and foraging/shredding as our examples of foundation behaviors. These are behaviors that we teach and reinforce birds here in the hospital and our flocks at home! When training with your bird, we always recommend the use of positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is the addition of a favorable outcome (like a favorite treat, head scratch, verbal praise, or game) following a desired behavior. For example, you offer your hand to step up and your bird hops on your hand, then you give your bird a pine nut. Since your bird’s favorite treat is pine nuts, he is more likely to step up again in the future! Occasionally positive reinforcement is confused with bribery. The big difference is that positive reinforcement is a highly effective way to give our birds feedback. When they choose behaviors, we would like to see more of, stepping up or touching a target, we use positive reinforcement to let them know “great job!” with one behavior and they will be reinforced for repeating this behavior in the future! We recommend avoiding the use of punishment with your birds, as this can damage the bond you share with your bird. The use of positive punishment, defined as the addition of a stimulus to make a behavior less likely to occur, doesn’t teach the bird what behavior is acceptable to do instead of the behavior they are being punished for. Common punishments seen with birds include spraying a spray bottle, “earthquake” or shaking your hand with the bird perched on it, or flicking the bird’s beak. Many times, punishment is used as a last resort or out of frustration from biting. These situations can be challenging and frustrating for the owner, but it is important to remember that biting is a form of communication for our birds. Even though biting is inconvenient for us (nobody likes to be bitten by their parrot!) it is important to remember that biting serves a purpose for our birds. There are many reasons that a bird might bite like if they are trying to communicate “no” or they are startled by something. If you are having problems with your bird biting, please reach out to your veterinarian for help.

❑ “Step-Up”: When thinking about basic training for birds, stepping up/stepping down (off the hand) is probably one of the first behaviors to come to mind. Although it is easily considered a “basic” behavior, stepping up is quite complex! Imagine somebody telling you to hop on their back for a piggy-back ride, many people would hesitate! To ask a bird to step up, offer your hand slightly above their feet so they have something to actually step UP to. Provide a firm and solid perch with your hand – a shaking, hesitant or unsure hand will not be a desirable perch for most birds to transfer their weight to. Wait for both feet to be on your hand before whisking them away and keep in mind that it is not necessary to have a hold on their feet, many birds dislike this. Keep in mind that every bird is different. Some birds prefer stepping backwards onto your hand, or even your left or right hand. Some birds prefer to step to a perch or towel if they are fearful of hands or may find the perch/towel to be more desirable. If your bird already knows how to step up, great! Don’t forget to reinforce them occasionally to keep this behavior fun highly reinforcing, and an easy choice for them to make! If you are teaching your bird how to step up, it doesn’t happen overnight. Give yourself and your bird time and patience. By offering a special treat you may be able to lure your bird onto your hand or you may need to break the behavior into small steps or approximations to reach your goal behavior.

❑ Foraging and Shredding: Foraging and shredding activities are behavioral enrichments that every parrot should know! Not only are these activities important for keeping our birds active and mentally stimulated but they are normal and natural for their wild counterparts. You can teach your bird how to forage and shred paper/wood/toys using the same positive reinforcement training as you would to teach them to step up or training tricks! Chewing and shredding are normal and healthy behavior for parrots, although sometimes it may be challenging for us to provide materials we find “appropriate” to chew (example: chewing wood toys instead of chewing the floor boards). If your bird doesn’t show interest in chewing on paper or wood toys it is likely that they do not know how to chew or shred, or at the very least they don’t know how reinforcing it can be! Start by offering them a toy or bunch of shredded paper and when they go to investigate, even touching the toy with their beak, reinforce them with a treat, toy, or something else they find reinforcing! Everything we reinforce with our birds they are more likely to repeat. Given this, you will notice quickly that your bird will take larger bites and tearing larger shreds when you offer shredding toys. After practicing this with you and building up a reinforcement history (when I chew on wicker toys good things happen) that they will be able to repeat this behavior on their own. Foraging is best taught in small steps and is outlined in more depth on the next worksheet, titled “Foraging Behaviors”.

❑ Target Training: Target training has many real-life uses and is a fun activity for you and your parrot. Regardless of how long you have had your bird or what your relationship is like, target training is an excellent exercise in communication, which is highly reinforcing and empowering for your bird. The basic concept of target training is that the animal orients a

certain part of their body to an object for a favorable outcome. A good starting point for birds is teaching them to touch a target, like a chopstick, with their beak. Offer the chopstick and if they investigate with their beak, as many parrots do, offer them a treat! Start by offering the target in front of their beak, and then slowly start to move it away so they have to lean to touch the target, take a step to touch the target, and so on. If your bird is able to touch the target and accept reinforcement, repeat this step a few times and then try offering the target in a different location. If your bird is unable to touch the target, then we need to reevaluate: Are we asking too much? Do we need to change our reinforcement plan? Have we been training too long? Of course, there is a wide variety of other factors. This is where the importance of communication comes in: If our birds don't participate with training, that's OK. We let them know that we hear what they are saying and stop training and revisit it later. Target training is a great pathway to tons of important training, like going into the carrier willingly, taking medication from the syringe without restraint, tricks, and much more. Have fun!