

P·E·T 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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inthisissue

Does your **Parrot** have a **Trust** account?

By **STEVE MARTIN**, Natural Encounters, Inc.

Why are so many people so unhappy with their companion parrot? How can these beautiful, intelligent and entertaining creatures cause so much anxiety and frustration? After all, we paid a small fortune to have them in our homes and to care for them properly. Why don't they recognise how much we love them and how much time, effort and money we spend on them? They cuddle with us, close their eyes and moan approvingly when we scratch their heads. They seem to look forward to being with us and can't wait for us to come home. But, then they go and scream at the top of their lungs ... loud enough to rattle the windows... at the neighbour's house. If that's not enough, when we finally go to let the bird out of the cage it bites us! How did that cute, cuddly, intelligent little angel turn into a screaming, violent, foreign being?

These questions and more are asked every day in the companion parrot community. There is no panacea, no quick fixes, no solution that works exactly the same for every bird and every owner. Part of the attraction and majesty of parrots is in their individuality. Each and every bird is wonderfully unique. Its behaviour is shaped and influenced by natural tendencies combined with environmental conditions and experiences. As parrot owners, our actions are just part of the many ingredients added to the primordial soup that determines how our parrots will behave. There are countless other influences on behaviour that help to determine how a bird behaves in certain situations and environments. However, our actions are among the most important of these factors because they form the base for our relationships with our birds. That relationship is the focus of this article.

Trust deposits

The best relationships are the ones built on a solid foundation of trust. Most often, this trust is built slowly, over weeks or even months with some birds. Each time we interact with our birds in a positive way we make a deposit into our "Trust Account" at the Bank of Relationships. As our account grows, our birds become more and more confident in us and more willing to be with

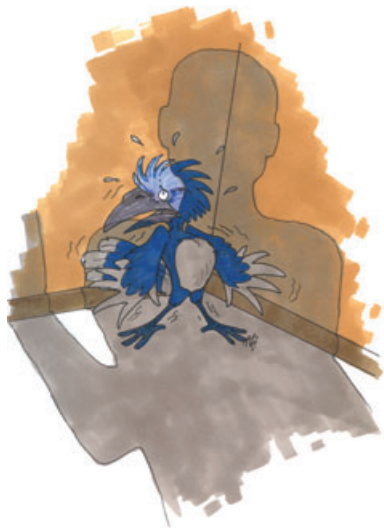


us. Positive reinforcement is perhaps the most valuable experience we can provide our birds because of its effect on strengthening behaviour. By definition, positive reinforcement is a process where something is provided to an animal that increases or maintains a behaviour. The reinforcer can be anything a parrot likes, such as a scratch on the head, verbal praise, companionship, treats, etc. Each occurrence of positive reinforcement is a deposit that

feeds our trust account and strengthens our relationship portfolio.

Avoiding withdrawals

Conversely, each time we use aversives, or do something the bird dislikes, we make a withdrawal from our trust account. Unfortunately, it is very easy to make withdrawals when working with companion parrots. For example, a common strategy for taking a parrot out of the cage is to chase it around the cage until you finally block its escape and force it to get on your hand. Likewise, to get it back into its cage simply move quickly and block its escape with your body. Because these strategies can work most people don't see the problem with them. They get the bird in and out of the cage. In fact, there are many people who readily encourage this type of training. They say things like "Make sure the bird knows you are the flock leader" and "Don't let him get away with making independent decisions." I have also seen people advocate repeated step-ups, or laddering exercises to encourage compliance with the step-up command. They don't realise that every time you force a bird to comply with commands like this you make a withdrawal from the trust account. If you make too many withdrawals, you will find yourself in the relationship poorhouse. When this happens many people end up blaming the bird instead of accepting responsibility for



If your parrot jumps to the door when you approach, try training a more desirable behaviour instead. Consistently reinforcing your bird for going to the perch to be picked up can effectively eliminate the door clinging behaviour.

bankrupting the account. Some people choose to blame the bird by labelling it as phobic, hormonal, aggressive, jealous, abused, etc. These labels do little more than relieve the owner of responsibility for their bird's poor behaviour and take away the person's motivation to deal with the behavioural issue. Once the parrot takes the blame for the bloodied hands being thrown up in defeat, the bird is likely headed to a new home, sanctuary or rescue organization.

Aggression is not the only problem associated with using aversives with animals. According to Dr. Susan Friedman, a leading authority on the science of parrot behaviour, the scientific community has described certain detrimental side effects associated with forcing animals to perform behaviours. They have shown with hundreds of species from cockroaches to whales that the use of aversives (things an animal dislikes or wants to avoid), might produce one or more of the following side effects: increased aggression, escape/avoidance behaviour, generalised fear of the environment, and apathy or generalized reduction in behaviour. These side effects are standing by - ready to eat up the trust you have worked so hard to build - any time you force a parrot to do anything it does not want to do.



Photo: NEI

Positive reinforcement

The most enduring and rewarding relationships are built on a solid foundation of positive reinforcement. When a bird does something good, it receives a reward which increases the likelihood the behaviour will occur again. Even a scratch on the head, verbal praise or a bit of attention can be enough to encourage a behaviour to be repeated in the future. Positive reinforcement is a tool that can solve even the most stubborn behavioural problems. Let me give you an example.

Many parrots jump on the door in anticipation of the owner opening the cage. Most people are frustrated with this behaviour and want it to stop. Rather than using punishment to stop the door-clinging behaviour a parrot owner should think of how to teach the bird to do a more desirable behaviour instead, like sitting on the perch when they open the door. If you reinforce the bird's behaviour of sitting on the perch when you approach the cage, the bird will soon learn to go to the perch anytime you come near.

A parrot's biting or screaming behaviours, or just about any other undesirable behaviour, can often be eliminated with positive reinforcement. Instead of thinking



Through repetition and proper reinforcement a parrot can be trained to calmly return to the cage.

about how you can stop the behaviour, picture the behaviour you want to see in place of the undesirable behaviour and reinforce any small step toward that behaviour. For instance, if your parrot bites you when you put it back into the cage, you can reinforce the bird with a treat as you approach the cage, before he starts to think about biting you. After you give the bird the treat, back up and start again without actually putting the bird in the cage. After a few repetitions of being reinforced for sitting calmly on the hand as you approach the cage, the parrot will usually let you carry him or her into the cage to receive a treat. At this point, it is best to take the bird out of the cage and repeat the behaviour of putting the bird in the cage to earn a treat. Repetition builds confidence. Soon the bird will understand that going in the cage means getting a treat and not being locked inside. After the bird is comfortable going in and out of the cage for treats, you can give it a special treat or a large number of treats to reinforce the behaviour of you shutting the door.

Conclusion

Fighting the urge to use aversives when working with parrots can be challenging. Many people grew up in an environment where negative experiences played a significant role in shaping their behaviour. This cultural tendency to influence behaviour negatively is evident in a myriad of sources in our lives. Parents, teachers, siblings, schoolmates, etc. all use a variety of negative strategies to force people to comply with commands and rules. They also punish people when they do not follow the rules or live up to certain expectations. With this in mind, it is easy to see why some people are inclined to try to dominate and control parrots and other animals with negative strategies.

What most people fail to understand is how their use of force with their parrots may have a negative effect on their relationship with the bird. If the parrot's wings are clipped it is easy to get it to step on the hand by chasing it around. What is less evident is that this chasing may cause one

or more of the detrimental side effects mentioned above. The parrot might turn around and bite when it is being chased or even later, when it is sitting comfortably with the owner. It might try to avoid the person in the future or become nervous or frightened of the person or the environment. Lastly, the parrot might become less active in the person's presence or in general. All of these side effects are likely to be the result of what many people believe, or have been told, is the proper way to handle parrots.

The relationship a person has with their companion parrot is strongly influenced by their day-to-day interactions with the bird. To create the best relationship possible with a companion parrot focus on creating positive experiences and avoid negative experiences whenever possible. The more deposits, small and large, you have in your trust account, the more your account can withstand an occasional or accidental withdrawal. This strategy will build the trust account and create a relationship that is more rewarding and fulfilling than many people thought possible.



Even a scratch on the head (if your bird likes it), a kind word or a bit of interaction can be powerful reinforcers for good behaviour.