



Twenty Years

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Saving Parrots

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Nothing but **Fear** itself



"Look. It's just a string bean. See? It won't hurt you."

Have you ever found yourself having a similar conversation with your parrot? You could replace "string bean" with whatever object or situation causes a fear response from your bird. It's really incredible what some parrots find frightening! However, as silly as it might seem to us, to our birds it is serious business. Fear responses are no laughing matter.

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Preventing and reducing fear responses in your bird has many potential benefits. It has the potential to create a more engaging companion parrot. It can also lead to the reduction of stress. I recall visiting a home for a consultation to discover a very wide eyed, trembling Umbrella Cockatoo. This sensitive bird showed fear responses to almost everything. The slightest movements by anyone in the area created a reaction. This bird also exhibited feather damaging behavior. It is certainly possible that the bird used such behavior as a stress coping mechanism. Fortunately by giving this cockatoo a chance to experience the world through positive reinforcement training strategies, it was given a new lease on life.

Positive Methods to Reduce Fear

Positive reinforcement strategies involve focusing on kind and gentle methods to teach your bird that circumstances that were once frightening now result in desired consequences. To better demonstrate how to apply the principles let's work through an example. Imagine trying to introduce a new toy into the cage of a bird that responds with fear behaviors.

As you approach the bird's cage with the new toy you observe a fear response: the bird quickly moves to the back of the cage away from the approaching toy. Instead of putting the toy in the cage anyway, you take a few steps back until he



It is our job to learn to be sensitive to the body language that indicates whether or not our parrots are comfortable with a situation.

Article and Photos by Barbara Heidenreich



What does a fear response look like?

When frightened, parrots will often try to move or lean away from what they fear. Their eyes may be open wide as they present darting looks in search of an escape path. Many parrots will stand tall and slick their feathers down tight to their body. Parrots with crest feathers often raise their crests. Feather quivering, slightly open mouth and rocking side to side motions may also sometimes be associated with fear responses.

shows behavior that indicates comfort. You then gently and slowly place the toy on the floor in the bird's line of sight. Each day you move the toy slightly closer to the cage, paying attention to whether or not the bird displays any behavior indicative of fear. If you notice fear responses, you move the toy away from the cage until the bird shows calm behavior. Over time you are able to get the toy right next to the cage. Next, you gently hang the toy on the outside of the cage away from food or water bowls (you don't want your bird to be driven away from his resources by fear). This process is known as systematic desensitization. It is the idea of gradually exposing a subject to fear producing stimuli, starting with

the least frightening situation and working towards the most frightening while the subject remains in a relaxed state.

After you have achieved this success, you can now focus on using positive reinforcement to train your bird to approach the new toy. An easy way to do this is to use a target. Targeting involves teaching your bird to orient a body part towards something. The target can be the end of a chopstick, a closed fist, or any object you choose. Usually parrots are trained to orient their beak towards the target. If your bird knows how to follow a target, you can present the target to the bird in the cage away from the toy. Gradually move the target closer and

closer to the new toy. Each approximation is reinforced with food or another desired positive reinforcer. If your bird is especially fearful, many small approximations may be required. It may take several training sessions for your bird to move close enough to the new toy to touch it.

Now that your bird is close to the toy, you can work on teaching him to touch it. One strategy to encourage this action is to place treats on the toy. At this stage in the process the bird might be willing to take the treat off of the toy. This behavior can be further encouraged with more reinforcers offered from your hand after the "bait" is eaten. After the bird retrieves several treats placed on the toy, it is likely he may touch the toy without the need for a treat as a lure. At this point a bridge and positive reinforcer can be offered after the bird makes the effort to touch the toy. If touching the toy is particularly challenging, a treat can be held in such a way that the bird must accidentally touch the toy to retrieve the treat. If needed, approximations can continue to include touching the toy for longer periods of time or actually manipulating it with the beak.

Another teaching strategy that can also be beneficial is modeling or observational learning. At a distance at which the bird is comfortable you can demonstrate interacting with the toy yourself. You can also have your parrot watch another bird interacting with the toy.

If your bird knows how to target, you can use this behaviour to help him learn to approach a new toy.





Do

- Learn to recognize the slightest indication of a fear response in your bird
- Use systematic desensitization – gradually expose your bird to what is creating a fear response
- Train the desired behavior with positive reinforcement
- Use small approximations
- Reinforce calm behavior
- Allow the process to take time
- Pair positive reinforcers with whatever is creating a fear response
- Use modeling – you or another bird can demonstrate the desired response

Don't

- Don't create even the slightest fear response
- Don't use flooding
- Don't force a bird to participate when it is frightened
- Don't rush for results

Common Pitfalls

Using positive reinforcement to address fear responses has been shown to be effective time and time again. However, it can present challenges, especially if the companion parrot owner is anxious for quick results. Impatience may lead to compromises in training strategies. This in turn can lead to failure. Fine tuning your sensitivity to recognizing fear responses is an important component in the training process. A “little afraid” is a “little” too much. Avoiding creating fear responses is important to success with positive reinforcement strategies. This fear response is often increased when owners try to use force to create the behavior. Forcing a bird to remain in the presence of a highly feared stimulus until fear responses subside is called flooding. This process is extremely stressful and traumatic for the bird and certainly not required to get the desired result as the example presented demonstrates.

The example presented is just one situation. There are many different scenarios which might create a fear response in your bird. Therefore it is helpful to think through the approximations for the particular situation you are trying to address prior to training. Apply the recommended “Do’s and Don’ts” in each situation.

Systematic desensitization can help your parrot learn to accept new toys.

Fear Responses and Young Parrots

Young parrots offer a unique opportunity to prevent fear related behaviors. Breeders that are able to expose young birds to new environments, new people, objects and materials they may encounter later in life (such as kennels, nail clippers, towels, etc.) can make a big impact. Very young birds are typically receptive to the introduction of new things. Care still should be taken to introduce new things slowly as well as associate positive reinforcers with the new items. This is because a bird’s first experience with something can have lasting impact. For example if the first time a bird went into a kennel was because it was shoved or forced into it, it will be more challenging to train that behavior with positive reinforcement in the future. If a bird’s first experience with entering a kennel was based on positive reinforcement training strategies and at some point the bird needs to be forced into the kennel, it is more likely the behavior will be easily recovered. A young bird provides a great opportunity to create a wealth of positive experiences with new objects and different situations. Take advantage of this critical time period.

Paralyzed with fear? Unlikely. Parrots are more prone to seek opportunities to escape or avoid a situation they find frightening. Avoidance is certainly contradictory with the goal of trying to create the best relationship possible with a companion parrot. Focus on showing sensitivity to fear responses and using positive reinforcement to turn a fearful feathered friend into a confident companion.

