

What's Wrong with the Step Up Command?

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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 onto the hand being forced to comply. This usually involves maneuvers such as a hand pushing 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 myself this is very unpleasant to picture. Why one might ask? Certainly the mentioned strategies can create the desired resulting behavior of 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 or peeling toes are uncomfortable experiences for a parrot, no matter how minimal the aversive is.

Fallout from Force

There can be serious repercussions with lasting effects from using aversives to gain cooperation. One of the most common results is a parrot that learns to bite in response to the presence of a hand. 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 bird can learn in that one encounter that biting works! And 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. A more trust building approach is to heed the parrot's body language prior to biting. Typically a parrot will present other body language that indicates discomfort well before a bite is landed. By carefully observing body language and making adjustments so that the bird appears as comfortable as possible, a sensitive avian caregiver is more likely to gain cooperation without aggressive behavior.

The same can be said for fear responses. Many likely 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 realistic is the explanation that the bird's experience with hands taught it to display fear responses.

Side Bar

Fallout that has occurred from forcing parrots to step up

- *How many birds now bite due to forced step up behavior?*
- *How many birds are given up due to biting problems?*
- *How many birds are afraid of hands and flee to the back of their cages?*
- *How many birds are relegated to cages with little attention or enrichment because they learned to bite or are afraid?*

- *How many birds suffer fates worse than this because they responded to force with understandable aggressive behavior and/or fear responses?*

Positive Reinforcement Offers Hopes

Unfortunately 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. But the good news is it can be done. This is particularly important to note as so many birds are often given up, left with little or no attention, or suffer fates worse than that due to being labeled a biter or no fun, through no fault of their own. It is always a sad moment for me to encounter a parrot that has learned aggressive behavior. It is sad mainly because it never had to be 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. This observation led me to conclude that the difference is information. The community training flighted parrots for shows has 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. This means an important opportunity lays waiting for companion parrot caregivers. With positive reinforcement training finally making its way to many avian caregivers, parrots and their owners now have hope. No longer do parrots have to obey, instead they can learn stepping up results in desired consequences. They can learn to look forward to stepping up!

Positive Reinforcement Vs Negative Reinforcement

Change can be difficult. And those accustomed to using negative reinforcement to create behavior 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 effectiveness is not always the measure one needs to consider as a conscientious caregiver. The reason is that 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. While results can be immediate, 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, it is understood that one may do whatever is required to ensure his or her parrot is safe. However sometimes the lines get fuzzy on what constitutes an emergency. Being late for work is not an emergency enough for this trainer to abandon her positive reinforcement training strategies. In the long run I will get more reliable performance of 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 for the behavior of step up in most cases.

Tips on Training Step Up with Positive Reinforcement

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 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 identified hand should remain stationary and in a position that facilitates an easy step onto the hand for the bird. The goal is not to move the hand towards the bird, but for the bird to voluntarily move to the hand by following the target.

A bird that has had an unpleasant history with hands may show signs of apprehension or aggressive behavior as it ventures closer to the hand. Reinforce generously the frightened bird that dares to move in closer. If the parrot shows aggressive behavior, gently remove the hand as well as any positive reinforcers being made available to the bird for just a few seconds. This not only demonstrates to the bird that its body language was understood and acknowledged, but it also removes the opportunity to gain positive reinforcers. When this strategy is paired with reinforcement of the desired behavior, the bird can quickly learn to increase calm behavior and decrease aggressive behavior without the use of training strategies that rely on aversives.

Eventually the parrot can learn to voluntarily step up onto the hand to earn positive reinforcers. While the bird is learning to step up, the targeting behavior can be used to help direct the parrot where to go if needed for basic husbandry duties. This helps avoid caregivers resorting back to negative reinforcement training strategies to move birds during the re-training process.

Conclusion

A positive reinforcement approach embraces giving animals choices to participate. Caregivers can try to make it easy for parrots to choose to present the desired behavior, such as step up, followed by ample rewards. The result is a companion parrot that eagerly anticipates interacting with its caregivers. One of the joys of sharing ones life with a

companion parrot is the relationship that can be forged between the caregiver and the bird. Positive reinforcement fosters trust and that incredibly rewarding relationship. 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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Barbara has been a professional in the field of animal training since 1990. She owns and operates a company, Good Bird, Inc., (www.GoodBirdInc.com) that provides behavior and training products to the companion parrot community. These products include Good Bird Magazine, books, videos, and training/behavior workshops. Barbara has provided behavior workshops and/or animal training presentations at the Association of Avian Veterinarians conference, The American Federation of Aviculture conference, The International Parrot Conference at Loro Parque, Parrot Festival, The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators conference, American Association of Zoo Keepers conference, Association of Zoos and Aquariums conference, The Parrot Society of Australia conference and many more. She is a past president of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (www.IAATE.org) and served on the Board of Directors from 1997-2009. Her expertise has been utilized by the US Dept. of Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife Service and numerous international professional organizations.

She is the author of “Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots” by Avian Publications and also “The Parrot Problem Solver. Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behavior” by TFH Publications. She is also the producer of the Good Bird Parrot Behavior and Training DVD series.

Barbara’s experience also includes consulting on animal training in zoos and other animal related facilities. She has been a part of the development and production of more than 15 different free flight education programs. Barbara continues to provide consulting services to zoos, nature centers and other animal facilities through her other company Animal Training and Consulting Services. In her career she has trained animals, trained staff, and/or presented shows at facilities around the world.