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The Parrot Steward

Teaching Your Parrot to Target

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By teaching your parrot new behaviors using positive reinforcement, you accomplish many valuable things:

- When you step into the role of trainer, you encourage him to look to you for guidance and direction, rather than just relating to you through physical affection.
- Teaching new behaviors has a way of automatically reducing problem behaviors.
- Teaching new behaviors enriches your parrot's life, giving him more control over his experience.
- Training is really another foraging experience for your bird.
- Training builds trust in relationship.

The best first behavior to teach is **targeting**. This is an easy behavior for your parrot to learn, which helps him learn the "training rules." It's also an easy behavior to teach, which allows you to develop your mechanical skills.

There are several benefits to having a parrot who targets. You can use the target to teach other behaviors, such as the turn around, going into a carrier on cue, and climbing a ladder. Another important advantage is the fact that any person can then move the parrot to a new location by placing the target there and cuing the behavior. Targeting can also assist in teaching step up or fly to me.

Targeting is the behavior of touching a body part to an object. When we teach a parrot to target, we usually teach him to touch his beak to the tip of a target stick. I suggest using a chop stick for this purpose.

You will also need to identify appropriate reinforcers (rewards). I suggest that you begin with a favorite food, such as small pieces of nuts or seeds. Hopefully, you have taught your parrot to eat a low-carb, low-fat diet with a good quality pellet as the primary staple. This will make your reinforcers especially valuable to him.

The steps to teaching targeting are as follows:

- Prepare an assortment of small nut pieces and seeds to use for positive reinforcement. The correct size should be no bigger than half of a pine nut. The smaller the better. When you're training a parrot, you don't want him to get full too quickly, limiting the amount of time you can train. And, you don't want him to take too long eating each treat. If he holds it in his foot to eat it, then it was too big.
- Have your parrot perched on his cage or other spot where he has good balance.
- Offer a treat to calculate his interest.
    - If he takes it readily and eats it quickly, then looks to you for more, you are free to proceed (this indicates a good level of motivation).
    - If he eats it slowly or takes it and drops it, it will be best to postpone training for another time, such as right before a meal perhaps.
- Watch him and wait to make sure that you have his attention, while you stand with both arms at your sides, treats in one hand and target in the other.

- Bring the target stick up slowly so that it is right in front of his beak. Watch carefully to see if the sight of it frightens him in any way.
    - If he looks scared of the target stick (even a little bit), you will need to counter condition him to interact with it.
    - To do this, hold the chop stick in one hand so that the tip is not visible.
    - Bring both hands up and begin feeding treats with one hand while you hold the concealed chopstick in the other.
    - Very slowly, as you continue to feed treats begin to inch the tip of the target stick out so that it is barely visible.
    - Incrementally allow a little more of the target to show as he continues to graze on the treats you have.
    - If at any time he looks worried, you have gone too fast and should back up to the last location for the target at which he accepted treats easily.
    - As he gets used to the sight of the target stick, position this so that he "accidentally" touches it, then give the treat afterward. At that point, you can proceed with your training sessions using the instructions below.
- Bring the target stick up so that it is right in front of his beak.
    - If he doesn't reach out to touch it, lower your arm to your side, wait a few seconds, and then try again. You don't want to reward a slow response.
    - When he does touch the target, immediately offer a food reinforcer.
        - A bridge (clicker) is not necessary, since you are right there to offer the treat immediately.
        - As you do so, lower your target hand so that it is by your side again.
        - Watch his beak; when it stops moving, you can cue the target again.
- Continue in this way, holding the target stick up so that he can touch it and rewarding him each time with a treat. (If he bites the stick, try holding it a little further away so that he can physically only touch it.)
- When he indicates that he understands exactly what he is supposed to do by touching the stick quickly, start to make the targeting more difficult by holding the target far enough away that he has to lean to touch it.
- When he does that eagerly, then hold it a little higher or lower.
- Next, hold the target so that he has to take a step in one direction or another in order to touch it.
- Continue to work in this manner, using small approximations until he will walk the length of the perch or across the cage in order to come and touch the target stick. ***Always*** reward him with a treat.
- Once he targets well on the spot you have chosen to work first, expand your training to other locations around the house so that the behavior becomes generalized.

Tips for Success:

- A video is worth a thousand words. Please check out the following: https://www.jennydrummey.com/parrot-videos from Jenny Drummey.
- Keep training sessions limited to about five minutes unless it is obvious that your parrot wants more. You can have more than one session in any given day, but the length should be limited.
    - You can tell when a parrot begins to slow down in enthusiasm because he will begin wiping his beak on the perch.

- If your parrot seems to lack motivation, try the following:
    - Find a different reinforcer that has more value than what you have been offering.
    - Try training at different times of the day.
    - If your parrot eats a seed mix, you may need to cut down on the amount you offer in his dish and use the balance for training. (Even better would be a diet improvement.)
    - Don't feel obligated to train every single day. You'll be amazed at his ability to "pick up where you left off."

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