

## Teaching Your Parrot to Target

Pamela Clark, CPBC, CVT

By teaching your parrot new behaviors, you accomplish many valuable things. First, 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. Second, teaching new behaviors has a way of automatically reducing problem behaviors. You also enrich your parrot's life. Training is really a foraging experience for your bird. It affords him all the enriching steps of other foraging experiences – anticipation, problem solving, discovery and reward.

The first step will be to teach your parrot to target. If you haven't previously done much training with him, it's best to begin by working on 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 improve your coordination and timing.

There are also 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 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 a target stick. I suggest using a chop stick for this purpose. 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.
  - Have your parrot perched on his cage or other spot.
  - Offer a treat to calculate his interest. If he takes it readily and eats it and looks to you for more, you are free to proceed because this indicates he will be motivated to participate in your training session. 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.
  - 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 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 wary about the sight of the target stick, you will need to pair the chop stick with reinforcers that will counter condition him to interact with the target.
      - To do this, hold the chop stick against your side as you begin to offer very small treats.
      - Very slowly, as you offer him treats (wait until he has eaten each one before offering the next) begin to move the target stick upwards toward your elbow.
      - If at any time he looks worried, you have gone too fast and should back up to the last location at which he accepted treats easily.
      - Continue to move the stick toward your elbow.

- Once you can offer him treats with the chop stick at your elbow and he takes them readily, you can begin to move it along your forearm slowly toward the hand that is offering the treats. By doing so, he will begin to regard the target stick as a positive thing, because you are pairing the sight of it with treats he values.
    - Eventually, you will get the target stick up to where it is even with your treat hand. When you think he is ready, move it slightly forward so that he touches it before you give him the treat. 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, say "Yes!" and reward him with a treat. As you do so, lower your target hand so that it is by your side again. (If you have the treats in the palm of your hand and offer them quickly, you don't even really need the verbal bridge.)
  - 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 understands exactly what he is supposed to do, start to make the targeting a bit more difficult by holding the target an inch to the right and then the left so that he has to lean a bit to touch it. Hold it a little higher than his beak so that he has to reach up, or lower so that he has to bend down to target.
  - 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 until he will walk the length of the perch or the cage in order to come and touch the target stick. **Always** reward him with a "Yes" and a treat.
  - Once he targets well on the spot you have chosen to work, 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: <http://understandingparrots.com/guide-to-target-training-your-parrot> from Stephanie Edlund and <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."

