

Teach Your Parrot to Target!

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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. This can be very important for maintaining balance in your relationship and avoiding problem behaviors.

Second, teaching *new* behaviors has a way of automatically reducing problem behaviors. Therefore, if your parrot screams to excess, you may very well see that behavior occurring less frequently, simply because you spend a little time each day teaching him something new.

You also enrich your parrot's life when you engage in this type of positive reinforcement training. When your bird is learning, he is problem solving – an activity he would perform daily in the wild. And, simply put, training is really a just another type of foraging experience. It affords him all the same enriching steps – anticipation, problem solving, discovery and reward.

Food Motivation for Training

Training parrots in the home is becoming more popular these days, but occasionally owners express frustration, saying that their bird is not “food motivated.” If you think about it, this can't be true. Birds need food to live, so they must by definition be food motivated. Most often when a parrot isn't interested in earning training treats, it is because he is getting too many fatty and carbohydrate-rich foods in the regular diet.

Thus, the first step before you can teach him anything may be to improve his diet. The best diet for parrots without special dietary needs, such as lorikeets, is to feed pellets with supplemental vegetables and limited low-sugar fruits. This type of diet not only contributes to best health, but increases motivation for learning. Your bird can still enjoy his seeds and nuts in limited measure. Just use them for training instead of putting them into his food dish!

Targeting as a First Behavior

Targeting is the simple behavior of touching a body part to an object. It has been used in dog training and zoos for decades. It is invaluable for moving animals from one place to another without needing to establish physical contact. That sounds useful for zoo trainers, but why should you teach your parrot to target?

I think it's best to teach targeting as a first behavior because it is easy for your parrot to perform and learn. It helps him to learn the “training rules” before going on to something more complicated. It's also an easy behavior for you to teach, which allows you to improve your own coordination and timing.

There are many benefits to having a bird who targets. Once a bird is adept at targeting, you can use it to teach fun tricks, such as turning around or ringing a bell. If you don't like having to forcefully place him into a carrier, you can teach him to walk in there willingly when asked. You can increase

his level of exercise by teaching him to climb a rope or ladder or to fly from place to place...all by using the target as a cue. One 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.

What If I Can't Handle My Bird?

Some parrots may be either too fearful or too aggressive to try to remove from the cage for training. If this is the case, you can simply teach targeting from outside the cage. The tip of the target can be inserted through the cage bars for him to touch and treats can be offered the same way.

It's not necessary to actually hand the parrot the treat. For birds who may bite, you can offer a treat on the end of a spoon or just drop it into the food dish. If you provide the treat quickly enough, he will learn that touching the tip of the target is the action that produces the treat, even if he's not accepting it from a hand.

Working with a fearful bird in this way helps a lot to establish a base of trust for future interactions. He will feel safer about interacting from the inside of his cage to begin with. As trust grows, it may be possible to use the target to encourage him to come out of the cage on his own without being handled. All of this holds true for parrots with aggressive tendencies also.

What Materials Do I Need?

You can use any object as a target, but I recommend a chopstick. These are inexpensive, readily available in most grocery stores, and seem to generate less fear than other items. Since many parrots are neophobic, it's easier if you choose an item that is more easily accepted.

You do NOT need a clicker. I read many things about clicker training that seem to convey that there is some sort of magic inherent in using a clicker. Not true.

The sound a clicker makes is merely a *bridge* or *event marker* that is offered to the animal in the instant he performs the desired behavior to let him know that a treat or other reinforcer is on the way. It is merely a sound. You can just as easily substitute a particular word, like "Yes!"

When teaching targeting, you are right there in front of the parrot with your treats in your other hand. Delivering them quickly is not usually a problem. Therefore, you do not technically need to use a bridge when teaching targeting. A bridge is needed *only* if you are not able to deliver the preferred food treat immediately.

One advantage of using a clicker is that it can be useful for improving your own timing when it comes to using a bridge. So, it's up to you. Bridge or not, your parrot will learn to target.

Let's Get Started!

You will be teaching your parrot to touch his beak to the tip of the chopstick. That is the goal behavior. These are the steps to follow:

- Prepare an assortment of small nut pieces, seeds, or other foods that you know your parrot *already likes*. 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. You also don't want him to take too long eating each treat, which slows down your momentum.

- Have your parrot perched on his cage or other spot without distractions.
- Offer a treat to calculate his interest. If he takes it readily, eats it quickly, and looks to you for more, you are free to proceed. This response indicates he will be motivated to participate. If he eats the treat slowly, or takes it and drops it, postpone the training for another time, such as right before a meal when he may be more motivated.
- To begin the training:
 - 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 afraid of the target stick, you will need to pair the chopstick with reinforcers that will counter condition him to interact with the target.
 - To do this, hold the chop stick alongside one leg 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 he will eagerly eat treats with the chopstick at your elbow, 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 second or two, 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.

How Long Should I Train?

Keep training sessions limited to about five minutes unless it is obvious your parrot wants more. You can have more than one session in any given day, but the length should be limited based upon your bird's behavior. It's best to stop when he is still accepting reinforcers.

At some point during the training, you may see your bird start to rub his beak against the perch. That is a sign that he is getting full and that you should stop the session soon. A second sign that it's time to stop is less interest in the treats themselves.

A last word - Don't feel obligated to train every single day. You'll be amazed at your parrot's ability to "pick up where you left off." Let this be fun for you both!

