



International Association of  
Avian Trainers and Educators

## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **TRAINING**

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## BACKGROUND

Historically, the behavior of birds in human care has been influenced using a variety of techniques. Contemporary trainers are moving away from methods which traditionally relied on force and coercion and are instead moving towards the least intrusive effective strategies.

Positive reinforcement training has become a critical management component for birds in human care. Whether for husbandry, medical, or educational purposes, training with positive reinforcement contributes not only to *enhancing* animal wellbeing, but also *better fulfilling* education, conservation, and research goals. An entire field of scientific study has been developed, and textbooks have been written on the topics of training, learning, and behavior change principles. This position statement will provide a brief overview of contemporary training methods. Animal caregivers are encouraged to increase understanding of the subject through further research, professional training, and mentorship. Attendance at conferences, participation in workshops, seeking mentorship, and other modes of professional development should be an important part of an animal caregiver's ongoing education.

## POSITION

IAATE supports training programs based on the scientific principles of behavior change using positive reinforcement.

IAATE recommends trainers demonstrate practical skills based on an ethical hierarchy of behavior change using the most positive, least intrusive, effective methods. (Friedman 2010).

*"The commitment to using the most positive, least intrusive, effective interventions allows us to think before we act, so we make choices about the means by which we accomplish our behavior goals. In this way, we can be both effective and humane. This is the minimum standard of care we should stretch to meet on behalf of the welfare of animals and caregivers alike."* (Dr. S. G. Friedman)

IAATE supports training for husbandry, cooperative care, enrichment, educational programs, shows, demonstrations, and falconry.

IAATE encourages training programs to consider the natural history of the species and the previous experiences of the individual animal.

IAATE recommends trainers commit to continuing education and openness to changing practices based on new information.





## SUPPORT FOR POSITION

### *Training Fundamentals*

Contemporary animal training programs incorporate operant conditioning with a focus on positive reinforcement to change or shape behavior.

Operant conditioning is a learning process in which the strength of a behavior is modified by its consequences. Favorable outcomes are likely to reinforce or strengthen future frequency of a behavior while unfavorable outcomes are likely to punish or decrease future frequency of a behavior.

At its most basic level, operant-based learning is associated with a three-term contingency: Antecedents, Behavior, and Consequences (ABCs). Antecedents are the conditions that precede behavior and are functionally related to it occurring. In operant learning, antecedents set the stage for behavior to occur, they don't cause behavior to occur. Behavior is anything the animal does that can be observed. Consequences are the conditions immediately following the behavior that are related to the behavior occurring again. Because consequences influence future frequency of behavior, skilled trainers are careful to consider appropriate reinforcers for desired behavior. Additionally, past consequences become antecedent conditions for future behavior as animals consider what happened the last time they performed a specific behavior before doing it again.

When a behavior increases or maintains as a result of consequence conditions, we see reinforcement is in play. Reinforcement procedures are described as positive or negative. In positive (+) reinforcement, a desirable stimulus is added to the environment, while in negative (-) reinforcement, an aversive stimulus is removed from the environment. Both positive and negative reinforcement procedures are associated with maintaining or increasing behavior. For instance, a macaw may walk from point A to point B to receive a peanut at point B. The peanut is added to the environment and reinforces the behavior. The same behavior can be trained with negative reinforcement if a towel (aversive stimulus) is presented near a macaw at point A and the bird walks to point B to escape the approach of the towel, thus removing the towel from its immediate environment.

Positive reinforcement is generally the preferred training strategy because the bird acts on the environment to gain something desirable. Negative reinforcement is a less desirable training method, in part, because there is an aversive stimulus in the environment that the animal works to avoid. In negative reinforcement training, the animal will generally only perform at the level necessary to avoid the aversive stimulus. In positive reinforcement training, the animal will show more approach behavior and eagerness to learn behavior to earn the reinforcer. Finally, in negative reinforcement there is a possibility of scientifically demonstrated detrimental side-effects such as escape-avoidance behavior, increased aggression, overall reduction in activity and fear of the environment, which are not associated with positive reinforcement training.





### *Benefits of Positive Reinforcement Training*

An important benefit of a positive reinforcement training program can be an increase in trust between bird and human. Animals that trust their trainers often demonstrate more confident approach behavior and resiliency and will often eagerly participate in learning more behaviors. In addition to improving the well-being of an animal by giving it more control over its environment, training with positive reinforcement can enable important veterinary and husbandry care for animals. Training animals to engage in behaviors such as voluntarily sitting on a scale or taking medicine, allows staff to better monitor health with less stress to the animal. When an animal is trained to voluntarily shift off exhibit for caregivers to clean their enclosure a safer environment is created for both the animal and keeper.

Training also enables the presentation of naturalistic behaviors to the public. When visitors to a facility can see a bird displaying species-appropriate behavior, they gain a better understanding of how that bird interacts with its ecosystem and why it is important for humans to participate in conservation of species and habitats.

### *Considerations for Success*

Two of the most important considerations for success are, 1) the bird being trained, and 2) the trainer doing the training. There should be no question that every bird and every trainer are individuals. Though generalities can be assumed, the reality is the behavior of each bird and each trainer represents that individual in that specific condition in that moment in time.

A critical component of the planning process for teaching any bird a new behavior is to consider the species' natural history. A review of a species' behavior in the wild will help to determine if an animal can or should do the behavior being considered. The natural history review will inspire behaviors and stories that presenters can include in the presentation and may also help inform how the animal is motivated and methods for problem solving during the training process.

Along the same line of consideration, an animal's previous experience may influence the path a trainer chooses when teaching new behaviors. A bird with no prior training experience may need to first learn the basics such as the relationship between a bridging stimulus and a reinforcer, whereas a trainer may be able to work at a faster pace with an animal that has a significant repertoire of trained behaviors.

A trainer's experience level and knowledge of the science of learning and behavior are important components of designing a successful training program. Inexperienced or novice trainers are well advised to seek and partner with a skilled mentor to help gain the required skills for success.

A successful training program is created when the right bird is partnered with the right trainer in the right environment. Some birds are simply not good candidates for participation in certain training programs. For example, parent-reared owls that have come through rehabilitation facilities are the least likely candidates for voluntary participation (see IAATE Position Statements on *Welfare of Human-reared vs Parent-reared Owls in Ambassador Animal Programs* and





*Selection Considerations for Non-releasable Birds*). However, even the best avian candidates for voluntary participation in training programs can fail when trained by the wrong person, i.e., a person without the proper experience and skills.

Using positive reinforcement, having several years of experience, or having a title that suggests high skills and knowledge, doesn't necessarily make an expert trainer. An expert should earn that title through their behavior. IAATE does not support the use of force and coercion as a routine practice, for example chasing a bird around an enclosure to secure it for programs or forcing it into a crate. IAATE does not support lowering a bird's weight to unhealthy levels (see IAATE Position Statement on *Food Management and Weight Management*). Relying on choices such as these to achieve desired behaviors would indicate a need for more learning and growth on the part of the trainer to reach the expert level necessary to provide the good welfare our birds deserve.

IAATE supports and promotes the continued acquisition of scientific knowledge and practical skills for all animal care professionals to elevate the wellbeing of the animals in our care.

## REFERENCES

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