

Better Animal Handling by Distraction and Respect

Our topics for this week are:

- **Distractions as a means of animal handling**
- **The value of an animal's respect for humans**

Animals that respect humans and handlers that use distractions as often as possible are the main keys for better animal handling.

Distractions

Distractions are the basis for most humane and effective animal handling techniques and are not painful when correctly used. Pain is a message sent to the brain that body tissue is being injured. Distraction is applying a stimulus that supersedes competing stimuli. When a distraction technique is applied severely or incorrectly, it can inflict pain. For example, when a nose twitch, a pinching distraction technique most often used on the upper lip of horses, is applied correctly there is no tissue injured and therefore no physical pain. If used inappropriately and the twitch causes pain, there is evidence of tissue damage, i.e., soreness persisting after releasing the twitch, loss of function of the upper lip, or a change in the appearance of the tissue such as swelling, cuts, or bruising. Other signs of pain in animals can be a decrease in normal activities, such as eating, grooming, or nesting. A hunched posture, tooth grinding, glazed stare, and elevated heart rate or respiratory rate may also suggest the presence of pain. Other examples of distraction for restraint include petting, scratching, tapping, soft “love pinches” and talking in a calm voice,

Some animals will react to distraction in fear if the previous use of that distraction was painful. When this occurs, chemical restraint may be needed if there is a reasonable possibility that fear will be intensified and hinder future efforts to handle the animal.

Respect for Handlers

Animals should be respectful, not fearful, of human handlers. Respect is gained by their knowledge that either pleasure (praise, food treats) or discomfort (not pain) will consistently occur with certain behaviors. Fear can result from the expectation of pain. If fear is from instinct, it can be moderated. If it is from having experienced pain, it is often permanent. Animals that are either fearful of handlers or have no respect for humans are the most dangerous to handle.

The leadership of a handler should be based on respect, not fear of injury. Leaders of animals establish their social position by the control of movement and access to resources. Effective handlers do the same. For example, well-trained dogs are required to sit before

receiving food and taught to wait before going through doors or up or down stairs. Food is provided only with permission of the handler. Large dogs without respect for handlers can be dangerous to handle. Dogs without basic socialization to humans prior to 4 months of age can be fearful of humans or have no respect for them as their leader.

In the case of large animals such as horses, the use of food rewards can be impractical or dangerous due to the risk of the animal invading the handler's personal space. Livestock wish to be left alone. Requiring them to respond to a stimulus and then removing that stimulus so that they are again undisturbed is a great reward to them. Rather than using food rewards, large animal respect for human personal space is more safely established by simply staring at the animal or moving a hand away from the handler's body. The stimulus is immediately removed after a desired response from the animal. Additional positive reinforcement with food rewards may be desirable in some cases, but the large animal's, especially horses, access to food should never be associated with being close to the handler, particularly their hands or pockets.

With dogs, respect for handlers varies widely among breeds. Working and herding dogs are inherently tuned into handlers. Because of their attention to the handler, they are easy to handle, but they require lots of exercise and more attention than most breeds. Other breeds such as terriers are easily distracted by small movements and can be more difficult to handle. They bond with owners and may not tolerate handling by others. Dog breeds that guard sheep, not herd them, were bred to prefer the company of sheep rather than humans. They can be easy to handle and hard to train.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Distractions to assist in restraining animals should never cause pain.**
- 2. An animal's respect for handlers is important for handler safety particularly in handling large dogs or horses.**
- 3. Respect for humans is best established during early socialization to humans, but is affected by breed and prior handling.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.