

Training Methods for Animals

Our topics for this week are:

- **Training methods for predator animals**
- **Training methods for prey animals**
- **Misuse of treats in training**

Training animals to be handled should be the major part of preparing young animals to become socialized with humans. The most effective means of training depend on species and what is to be learned. Success at training is dependent on animal genetics, observational learning from its mother, and the quality of handling it receives prior to puberty.

The foundation for success at handling and training animals includes selection of a young animal that is an offspring of parents that have been willingly receptive to their own training. A mother that has been properly socialized to humans and is quietly handled in the offspring's presence (observational training of offspring). And also, gentle repeated handling of the young animal during its critical socialization period.

Either positive reinforcement (adding a reward such as food treats) or negative reinforcement (removal of a noxious stimulus) are used to instill trained behaviors. The timing of either reinforcement is critical, i.e., within three seconds of the behavior to be reinforced with a treat or discouraged with a reprimand. Late negative reinforcement becomes simply punishment which can lead to the animal becoming aggressively defensive or developing a helplessness attitude that inhibits further learning.

Small Predatory Animal Training

Small predatory companion animals (dogs and cats) can be trained effectively with positive reinforcement. Their natural behavior is to investigate (hunt) sources of food and be rewarded by food when the hunt is successful. Misbehavior within their social group is corrected by immediate warning (growl or hiss) followed, if needed, by a sharp, brief vocal or physical reprimand by a more socially dominant member of the group. The reprimands must not be injurious and proper timing is essential. Most effective handlers emulate this with food treats for desired behavior and sharp, brief reprimands, vocal or physical, such as a tug on a training collar when needed for inattention or misbehavior. Treats for positive reinforcement of dogs should be the size of a pea to a grape and able to be eaten quickly. It should be a treat that the dog does not get at any other time. Food treats should be gradually supplanted with tactile and voice rewards, particularly if a dog is to become a working dog, guardian, or support companion. Negative reinforcement should not be harsh enough to lead to avoidance behaviors, such as the dog

avoiding collars or being unwilling to engage the handler visually. Aversive behaviors are commonly associated with shock collar training.

Large Prey Animal Training

Large prey animals (horses, cattle) can also be effectively trained to do tricks with positive reinforcement (food treats). However, this method can teach them to be a nuisance and dangerous since it can eliminate the animal's respect for human personal space that is needed for safer handling of large species. Food rewards are impractical for training horses for work or performance since carrying and providing treats is not possible when the work or performance is in progress.

Herd animals are also rewarded by being left alone by more dominant member of the herd. Work and performance horses are trained by providing a stimulus to elicit an action. The reward is an opportunity to rest. Behaviorists term this negative reinforcement carrying an erroneous connotation that punishment is involved. Trainers refer to this as pressure and release, a more descriptive phrase than negative reinforcement. For horses, the most desirable reward that is safe for a human to easily provide within three seconds is an opportunity for the horse to rest undisturbed.

It should be remembered that excessive handling can be harmful by exhausting young animals physically and mentally and may break down respect for the handler and his personal space. Advanced training of maturing or mature domestic animals involves shaping, breaking a task to be learned into small pieces, which are gradually refined. The refined small pieces of trained activity are then performed in sequence, a process referred to as chaining.

Aversive training methods should be avoided, but sometimes what is aversive is conditional. For example, spurs are used to train horses for lateral movement and choke or prong collars are used in dogs to regain a distracted dog's attention. Spurs, choke collars, and prong collars can be aversive, but they are not, if used with the correct timing and with the minimum effort to elicit an intended response.

Counterconditioning, Habituation, and Desensitization

Counterconditioning is rewarding no response. Counterconditioning is useful in training animals to accept something that might cause a fearful reaction. Counterconditioning is beneficial in training dogs and cats to accept veterinary hospitals, veterinary examinations, nail trims, blood collection, injections, and transport crates. Rewards are typically highly desired food treats, such as chicken or turkey baby food, peanut butter, braunschweiger, or squeeze cheese.

Habituation and desensitization are similar training methods. Habituation is providing a steady stimulus that causes an undesired response until no response occurs. Desensitization is using a repeated stimulus with increasing intensity until no response occurs. Habituation and desensitization are often used to eliminate a flight reaction to a fearful stimulus in prey animals, particularly horses. Another technique called flooding is used to habituate or desensitize an animal by rapidly presenting several stimuli until mental exhaustion and no response occurs.

Flooding is used in colt-starting contests to demonstrate rapid results for entertainment purposes, but flooding is a poor training technique with short-lived results.

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. Positive reinforcements, treat rewards, work well for training predators, such as dogs.**
- 2. Negative reinforcement, aka pressure and release, work best for training prey animals to work, such as horses.**
- 3. Using treats to train prey animals can be hazardous due to the risk of losing a respectful and safe distance from handlers and impatient nipping.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my recent books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* 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 150 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.