Parrots in Temporary Shelters:
The Groundwork for Empowerment and Trust

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Written for Avian Welfare Coalition Shelter Manual, Feb. 2004

The unfortunate increase of parrots in temporary shelters provides a unique challenge for those who work there. This challenge is made especially demanding partly due to our relative unfamiliarity with the general nature of parrots. Basing our expectations for parrot behavior on our vast experience with dogs and cats often results in an intrusive or forceful style of interaction that fails to help parrots settle and feel comfortable with the humans around them.

Parrots tend to be extremely wary of new people, places and things and caregivers often expect too much interaction too soon. In an effort to gain some control over their circumstances parrots are often quick to exhibit problem behaviors like lunging, biting and screaming. Although these problem behaviors can be resolved over time, the short term stay of most shelter placements requires that we realistically prioritize behavioral goals for both staff and parrots, and gain some basic knowledge about how to meet them, as well.

In a nut shell, my recommendation is that shelter staff works to reduce parrots' stress to the greatest degree possible while the birds are in their care. This approach will lay the groundwork for empowerment and trust that can hopefully be taken over and further developed by a more permanent placement with a family.

Highly Intelligent: What Does It Mean?
It is said the one thing we can rely on in life is change and that is certainly true for our long-lived parrots. It is the ability to learn that is the biological mechanism by which all animals cope with life's ever-changing circumstances. When we say parrots are highly intelligent we mean that they are extremely flexible learners, that is, they readily change their behavior based on experience. You can count on the fact that parrots learn something from each and every encounter with humans. This is good news because, to a large degree, you control the parrot's experience when it[1] encounters you. *With some basic behavior analysis skills you can arrange experiences that add to each parrots' bank account of positive interactions with humans.*

Power and Trust: Essential Building Blocks for Behavioral Health
An empowered animal is one that is enabled to influence its own circumstances. Research has shown that animals repeatedly exposed to aversive events without opportunity to escape eventually give up trying. Later when escape routes are made plainly available, they don't act to help themselves, remaining as if helpless in the aversive situation instead. The power to behave in ways that affects some self-determined end appears to be a critical building block for behavioral health. Enabling sheltered

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parrots to make choices whenever possible, such as where to go, or where to remain, is an important step toward empowering them. *Empower rather than overpower.*

Trust is the result of a behavioral history made up of past positive experiences with humans. Building a positive history is a matter arranging the parrot's environment so that positive behaviors are made easy and always result in desirable outcomes for the bird. When you make a request of parrots make sure there is something in it for them. *Facilitate rather than force.*

Astute readers will notice empowerment and trust are the antithesis of old-fashioned dominance strategies in which caregivers are encouraged to establish themselves as the "alpha-parrot"; "show them who's boss"; and "keep the upper hand". Instead, empower parrots to make choices and provide trust-building experiences by reinforcing the right choices. *Transform "have to" confrontations into "want to" opportunities by providing a clear reason why complying with a human request benefits the bird.*

Understanding Behavior

Although most parrots are surrendered from pet situations it's reasonable to assume they will have a hard time adjusting to the unfamiliar shelter environment and staff. In spite of their history living among humans, success or failure, the best image to hold in your mind while working with a parrot is one of a wild animal. This will hopefully facilitate a slow and forgiving interaction style. *Always allow the pace of every interaction to be set by the parrot.*

Parrots in captivity actually have a very short list of possible "misbehaviors" (from a human point of view) but those they do exhibit are very difficult for humans to live with. In addition to the natural need to chew with their beaks and habit of doing so indiscriminately, these behaviors can be loosely grouped into two classes: 1) Behaviors to get you to go away, such as biting and refusing to come out of a cage, and 2) behaviors to get you to come back such as continuous screaming or sticking to you like Velcro. It's important to realize that no behavior is performed willy-nilly or randomly. *Parrots learn to bite, scream and refuse requests because doing so serves the function to either escape or remove something aversive to them, or get something of value.*

Also, behavior is not performed in a vacuum. Antecedent cues and conditions set the occasion for (trigger) behavior to occur; and, outcomes (consequences) provide feedback about whether to repeat, modify or suppress a behavior in the future. These are the building blocks of learning and behavior – the ABCs: antecedents – behavior – consequences. By identifying antecedents and consequences three important objectives are accomplished. We can better 1) understand the function of particular behaviors for individual parrots, 2) predict future behavior, and 3) determine ways to change the environment to change behavior.

Here is an example of relationship between antecedents, behavior and consequences for a particular parrot–human interaction, changing food bowls.

A: Caregiver opens cage door to remove interior food bowl.
B: Parrot bites hand.
C: Caregiver leaves bowl and retreats from cage.
Prediction: Parrot will bite more in the future to remove caregiver from cage.

A dominance solution to this problem is to try to ignore the biting. However this roughshod approach teaches many parrots that they have no control over their environment (their communications are unheard), that you are not to be trusted, and that you require harder, more vicious bites to get you to back off. *Where parrots are concerned, force and coercion typically result in lose-lose situations.*

Instead of ignoring or forcing, we can change the antecedents that precede the behavior and the consequences that reinforce the behavior, in order to change it. For example, antecedent changes include fitting cages with outside access to food and water cups to avoid unnecessarily stressing birds when our hands are inside their cages. Consequent changes include adding a special treat food (e.g. a few corn kernels or a sliver of almond) in the first bowl to be changed so that feeding time becomes associated with a treasured treat not available at any other time. While the bird enjoys the treat at one bowl, you can be changing the others. *Avoid setting the occasion for your parrots to practice stressful or unwanted behavior. Take every opportunity to reinforce desirable behavior.*

Building Better Behavior: The Basics
- Behind every parrot behavior is a *reason*.
- To discover the reason look at what happens right after the behavior called the *consequence*.
- Parrots maintain or increase behaviors that result in valued consequences called *reinforcers*.
- The tricky thing is that every parrot is an *individual* -- a 'study of 1'-- and decides for itself which consequences are positive reinforcers.
- To learn what a particular parrot's positive reinforcers are, carefully *observe* its favorite activities, people and food treats.
- Most problem behaviors are the result of inadvertent reinforcment; you get what you reinforce so *catch `em being good* with praise, treats, and favorite activities, as often as possible.
- Behavior is triggered by *antecedents,* cues and conditions.
- *Thoughtfully arranged antecedents* set the occasion for cooperative behavior and reduce the need for force or coercion.

Replacing Force with Facilitation: Teaching Tips
Stepping up:
1. To teach a bird to step up, reward small approximations toward your hand rather than withholding reinforcement until you get the final behavior.
2. Parrots generally prefer to step up rather than down; position your hand for success.
3. A bird who wants to step onto your hand will signal you by raising its foot in anticipation.

4. For many birds, the most valued reinforcer for stepping up is to be put right back down again. Repeat this several times a day if possible.

Perching Calmly:
1. To teach a bird to stay calm when you approach its cage, advance only as far as the bird's behavior remains 'unruffled'. Advance one step closer only after all previous steps to that point are met with calm behavior from the bird.
2. For many birds, the most valued reinforcer for staying calm as you approach their cage is to take a few steps back away from the cage. For frightened or aggressive behavior, stand still where you are neither advancing nor retreating. When the bird calms, step back away. Then try one step closer again.
3. Pair your retreat with praise to make praise a reinforcer by association.
4. Drop a favorite food treat (one that is not available at any other time) every single time you pass by the bird's cage. This will make *you* a reinforcer by association.

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[1] The pronoun "it" is used when the sex of the animal being discussed is unknown. This follows biology and veterinary published writing conventions.