

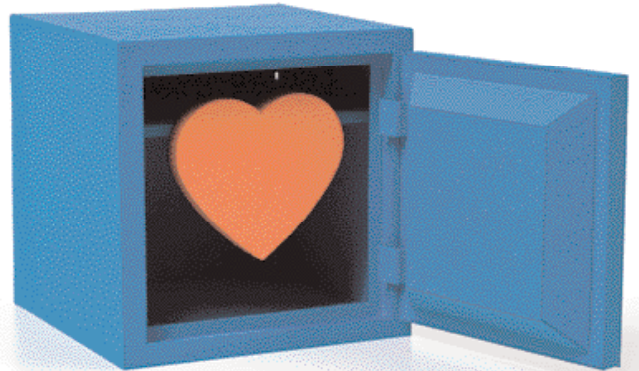


BACK IN THE BLACK

Rebuild a bankrupt relationship.

By Susan G. Friedman, Ph.D.

“A trusting relationship is the key to successful animal companionship.” Who hasn’t heard that pearl of wisdom before? It sounds reasonable, helpful even. But is it really? What does a trusting relationship with a parrot mean?



What should a person do to build a trusting relationship? Is it ever too late or can a broken relationship be fixed? The answers to these questions turn an inspirational saying into tools we can use.

I thought the word trust would be one of those vague labels that is tough to pin down. You know, hard to define but you know it when you see it. But when I checked the dictionary, I was intrigued to find two simple ideas that hit the nail on the head. Under the word trust it said, “the confident expectation of something” and “implies a feeling of security.”

If we put these two ideas together, from our parrot’s point of view, trust is a level of sureness that interacting with people produces safe outcomes. As a result of trust, parrots choose to interact with people more. Isn’t that exactly the kind of rela-

tionship we hope for with our parrots?

Trusting parrots use their behavior to confidently approach, rather than escape, opportunities to interact with people. They not only accept invitations to interact with their caregivers; trusting birds create interaction opportunities for their caregivers as well.

Think of it this way: Gaining an animal’s trust is like building up a bank account. We make deposits into the trust account one positive interaction at a time. Positive interactions are not just about animals gaining valued rewards but also about having the power to make choices. Alternatively, we make withdrawals from the trust account with negative interactions, such as the use of force, threats and punishment. Even small or inadver-

tent withdrawals add up over time, putting the relationship in the red. If a withdrawal is so big that it exceeds the positive balance, we risk bankrupting the relationship.

Although we often think of trust as a feeling, building — and breaking — trusting relationships with our birds is foremost about action. Put your current trust account to the test with your companion parrot; offer your hand at least 12 inches away from your bird. Birds with big trust accounts usually lift a foot, lean forward or in some way invite you to move your hand closer to step up. If your bird tightens its feathers, crouches, lunges or makes a dash in the opposite direction, it’s definitely time to figure out ways to deposit more positive interactions into the trust account.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST

We come from a culture that is very quick to punish behavior, which is one example of what I call cultural fog. Clearly, access to positive reinforcers is a better motivator than escaping punishment. Our own experiences, as well as behavioral research, bear this out. This punishment tradition produces quite a dilemma when the goal is building up a trust account with a parrot.

Fortunately, positive reinforcement teaching (PRT), which comes from the field of psychology called applied behavior analysis, is a much better alternative than punishment. This is the approach that has been so successful helping children with autism reach their full potential, has improved the quality of life for geriatric people, and it has increased industrial safety in factories. The very best dog trainers use this approach, and exotic animal trainers use it too. With PRT, we have reached a new level of humane, effective teaching.

Applied behavior analysis is based on a natural science approach to understanding learning and behavior. That means the principles and techniques we use come from more than 60 years of scientific inquiry in laboratories, classrooms and other real-life settings from corporations to zoos. We can trust that these techniques work well if used correctly, and move past personal recipes and magical thinking about how behavior works.

PRT is really very simple to summarize, and it's a slam-dunk for building up huge trust accounts. In a nutshell, make the right behavior easier and more rewarding than the wrong behavior. Accomplish that, and your bird will choose to do the right behaviors more.

With PRT, we spend very little time focusing on either stopping problem behavior or what birds shouldn't do. Instead, we focus on teaching parrots what to do. When it comes to misbehaving, don't bother catching them in the act — focus on teaching them how to act.

MAKE IT EASIER

Making the right behavior easier is about managing all the things that encourage or discourage the right behavior before it occurs (aka antecedent arrangement). For example, a cage with a small door can discourage a big bird from coming out on your hand and can encourage biting. To make the right behavior easier, get a cage with a bigger door.

A perch next to a window can encourage chewing the windowsill and discourage chewing toys. To make the right behavior easier, move the perch away from the window, and provide toys made of softer wood. To arrange the antecedents for success, survey the environment you share with your bird with fresh eyes. Every barrier you remove creates an opening for good behavior and instantly reduces the daily withdrawals you take from the trust account.

MAKE IT MORE REWARDING

Behavior is a purposeful tool. We behave for a reason. Just like people, animals choose behavior to maximize benefits and minimize losses in any situation. Knowing this, positive reinforcement teachers embrace one value above all others: Our learners should respond to requests because they have the skills and the motivation to do so, and not because they're forced to behave in order to escape punishment. We are responsible for teaching our parrots the necessary skills and ensuring they have the motivation to use them appropriately.

It is positive reinforcement that motivates our birds to learn new skills and to use them at the right time. A positive reinforcer is an immediate consequence that strengthens behavior. We can think of positive reinforcers as rewards, but they are really more essential than the superficial analogy to carrots and bribes, which I

think is another example of cultural fog. Remember, consequences (outcomes) are the reason for behaving; we act to get meaningful results. If we aren't behaving for an effect, what are we behaving for?

Positive reinforcers are the international currency at the relationship bank. To use them well, make sure the positive reinforcers you deposit are certain (consistent), swift (immediate) and strong (desired).

Shaping is the PRT approach to giving parrots the skills they need. To shape a new skill, break the goal behavior into smaller steps, called approximations. Positively reinforce each approximation until it is performed without hesitation, and then move on to the next step. Continue one step at a time until the goal behavior is performed. Shape small, reinforce big, and then practice, practice, practice, to build up trust accounts fast.

CAN YOU FIX A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP?

Short answer: Yes! Although, the rubber meets the road when a problem behavior arises. The final blow to a trust account already in the red is bad information (and unfortunately that's not in short supply). People bankrupt relationships every day by following advice to force, coerce and punish their birds.

Sometimes new words are used to disguise punishment, like "correction" or "discipline," but a thorn by any other name is still as sharp. Following this kind of advice results in big withdrawals from the trust account, unnecessarily.

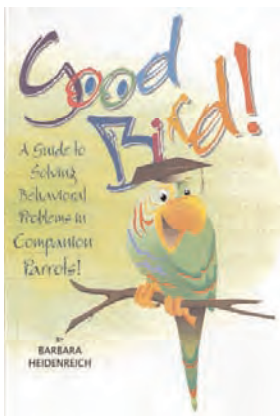
To get your relationship back in the black, reframe the way you think about



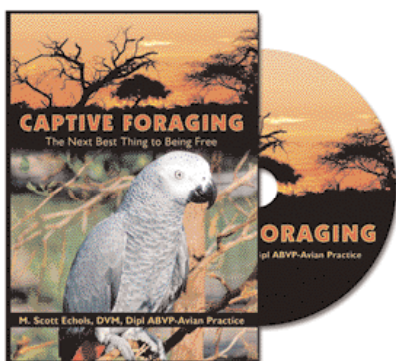
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problem behaviors. They really aren’t caused by dominance, stubbornness or any other abstract concept. Problem behaviors arise when a parrot lacks the skills, the motivation or the positive practice to do the right behavior.

Rebuild a bankrupt relationship with a PRT plan. The first step is to identify what you want the bird to do instead of the problem behavior; identify an appropriate alternative behavior. Then teach the alternative behavior with the shaping strategy. Every positive reinforcer you deliver as you implement your teaching plan adds trust to the account.

For example, instead of blowing in your bird’s face or wobbling your hand to decrease biting, teach your bird to stand tall when perched on your hand. At the beginning stages of this lesson plan you may need to lure your bird into an upright position with a small food treat. Offer a steady stream of treats for standing tall, and keep the sessions short.

With enough positive practice you’ll be able to slowly fade the food treats to more naturally occurring reinforcers (praise, smiles, a scratch on the head) and extend the duration of the sessions.

Here’s another example; instead of startling your parrot with unexpected loud noises or covering its cage to decrease screaming (two big withdrawals), teach your parrot to call you with pleasant sounds by reinforcing all tolerable vocalizations. Attention may be the strongest reinforcer in this case. Also reinforce your bird for independently playing with toys so that the bird chooses to call you less often. Independent play is something we definitely want to see more.

GIVE THEM CONTROL

The single most important thing I have learned over 40 years studying learning and behavior is the benefit of giving animals control over their own significant life events. Although it may seem counterintuitive given our cultural fog, research demonstrates that control over consequences is a primary reinforcer, meaning it’s essential to survival like food, water and shelter.

When a lack of control becomes a lifestyle, animals display unhealthy extremes by behaving aggressively or not behaving at all (i.e., apathy and depression), both dire results that we see all too often with companion parrots.

Clearly, there are occasions when every individual must do something she/he does not want to do, such as when a parrot must submit to being restrained for an emergency veterinary procedure. If we start with a big, positive balance, most



DON'T BREAK THE BANK

Avoid these anti-trust moves that break the relationship bank:

1. **BLOWING** in a parrot’s face
2. **STARTLING** a parrot with loud noises
3. **WOBBLING** your hand to create an unsteady perch
4. **FORCING** a parrot out of its cage with a towel or stick
5. **RESTRAINING** a parrot on your hand by holding its toes down with your thumb
6. **SPRAYING** a hard stream of water at a parrot’s face
7. **DROPPING** a bird to the floor
8. **SHAKING** a parrot’s cage
9. **HITTING** a parrot
10. **COVERING** a parrot’s cage for long durations
11. **CATCHING** a parrot with a net
12. **FLICKING** a parrot’s beak
13. **FORCING** a parrot to repeatedly step from one hand to the other (aka laddering)
14. **IGNORING** a parrot’s body language signalling discomfort with your approach or request
15. **ISOLATING** a parrot from its flock and family

relationships can afford the occasional withdrawal from the trust account.

Here’s a very important thing to consider: There is a strong correlation between the size of an animal’s trust account and its ability to bounce back after an aversive experience. This ability to recover is called resilience by behavioral psychologists. Building up big trust accounts results in resilient learners.

An example of empowering animals is the PRT approach to crate training (i.e., entering a pet carrier on request). Again, shaping is the right tool for this lesson plan. Depending on what your parrot offers, the first approximation to reinforce may be just looking at the crate; then leaning toward the crate, taking a step toward the crate, walking up to the crate, putting one foot on the ledge of the crate door, standing on the ledge of the door with two feet, stepping into the crate, walking to the back of the crate and, finally, standing calmly in the

crate for longer durations. Next, you can start shaping the door-closed position, and then moving the crate. That's hundreds of opportunities for deposits into the trust account.

One source of control for the parrot in this lesson plan is letting the bird set the pace throughout the approximations. Another empowerment opportunity is allowing the bird to leave the crate whenever it chooses. If the bird appears the least bit uncomfortable, open the door immediately. If the reinforcers for staying in the crate are stronger than the reinforcers for exiting the crate, your bird will choose to stay in the crate under its own control.

Over the many positive repetitions, your bird will choose to stay calmly in the crate with the door closed because it has the experience to trust that reinforcement will follow. Training this way may result in a different kind of "problem" to solve — can you write a PRT lesson plan to teach a bird that adores being in its crate to come out when cued? That's the right kind of problem to have.

It's easy to get carried away by the emotional content of an inspirational saying. But a saying is just a bunch of empty words unless we turn it into tools we can use. Framing each interaction with our parrots in terms of deposits and withdrawals in a shared trust account helps us to be mindful of how our actions build up, or bankrupt, our relationships.

To build big trust accounts, positive interactions should far exceed negative interactions. Resilient animals bounce back after an occasional aversive event, but you must be sure to keep the overall ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions really big. That's the way to get relationships back in the black. Allow your parrots control over their environments to the largest extent possible. In summary, arrange the environment so that the right behavior is easier and more reinforcing, and companion parrots will make the right choices. ●

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