

Have you learned the ABC's?
by Shauna Roberts

Of course you have or you would not be reading this right? We all learned to read and write our ABC's a very long time ago. But what about another type of ABC? The ones that you started to learn right after your birth but most likely have taken for granted your entire life, not actually realizing that you use them in your day to day life. ABC's are nothing new and as a science they have been in the toolbox of researchers and some psychologists and special educators for over 60 years.

So exactly what is ABC you ask? Well, A stands for antecedent or the environmental events that occur before a behavior, B stands for behavior which is anything that a creature does that can be observed and C is for consequence which are the environmental events that occur after a behavior and influence whether the creature does the behavior again.

So, ABC is a description (short version) of a response unit. It might help if you think of snapping a picture in time, like a freeze frame in order to see what happened just before a behavior, the behavior itself and the immediate consequence that followed that behavior. Also it's important to keep in mind that the consequence of any behavior will help to increase or decrease each behavior...In the words of Susan Friedman Ph.D there is never just "behavior".

For an example, let's use a personal favorite of mine, chocolate *smile*. I was walking into the kitchen when I....A. (antecedent)saw some chocolate on the counter B. (behavior) I put it in my mouth C.(consequence) it tastes good... so the probable future behavior when I see chocolate again is that I will eat chocolate and perhaps I could even be motivated to do other behaviors if I am offered chocolate as an incentive. The behavior of eating chocolate has been reinforcing to me, however, if you had bitten into the chocolate and the consequence was that it had an unpleasant taste to you, chances would be that you would not want more chocolate and you would avoid it. So a consequence predicts whether or not you will be encouraged to increase or decrease a behavior in the future.

So how about an ABC with a parrot. What about your parrot? What is a behavior that he or she does? Remember it needs to be a behavior, something that can be observed. Often I hear people using what has been termed as labels as though they are behaviors. So you need to ask if you can actually observe it. Some confusing pitfalls if you think of them as being behavior may be jealous, spoiled, intelligent, happy, sad, angry, aggressive, calm, hormonal, loving and the list goes on and on. What is the problem with these names/labels? The problem is that they don't really tell us anything. A happy bird to you may be one that is sitting (behavior) on a perch with feathers over its beak. A happy bird to me would be one that is screaming (behavior) and flapping (behavior) its

wings, where as you might think of that as being aggressive. If we describe the behaviors themselves however, instead of using the labels, we know exactly what we are talking about, painting an accurate picture for one another and once we agree on what a label means....such as happy means an energetic busy bird then we can use happy in our talks and have a clear meaning what each other is talking about. When using labels we tend to assume one person's meaning is the same as our meaning, when in many cases the meanings are quite different.

So...whenever you want to understand your birds behavior, remember don't look inside the bird, putting a label on its actions; rather identify the antecedents that set the behavior in motion and the consequences that reinforce it. Behavior has function! It serves a purpose for the bird.

So back to an ABC with your parrot. Have you thought of a behavior? can you observe it? What happens just before the behavior?...just seconds before not minutes or hours before and not multiple things before. And then what happens immediately after the behavior? Got it? You just did an ABC! Now let me try.

Background: Mackie is playing in his cage and sees me walk into the room. Mackie says to me step up! I go over and open his cage door, asking him to step up but he remains standing on his perch. I chat with him, scratch his head and ask him again to step up...he continues stand on his perch so I close the door and walk away.

A. I ask Mackie to step up

B. Mackie stands on his perch

C I give Mackie scratches and chatting

The probable future behavior will likely be that Mackie will continue to stand on his perch when asked to step up in order to receive head scratches and a chat.

So what to do?

There are always many ways to work at solving a problem or changing a behavior. That is one of the interesting and great things about using applied behavior analysis and the ABC's. One shoe never fits all, so these tools give you a chance to do what works best for you and your bird.

What if I ask Mackie to step up and I don't talk or give him scratches? BUT as soon as he lifts a foot and leans towards my arm he receives praise from me and once he does step up I give him more praise and scratches. Let's do an ABC

A. I ask Mackie to step up

B. Mackie steps up

C. Receives praise, scratches and fun time with me

PFB (probable future behavior) Mackie is going to continue to step up to receive scratches and focused attention from me.

Does it look easy? ABA really isn't all that easy and has had me scratching my head multiple times but it is a valuable tool to help us all figure out better ways of approaching and working with behavior. A way to help us find positive solutions and not use force, punishment or other less desirable methods that often tend to backfire on us later on. A common example is the use of a squirt bottle for a screaming bird. Squirted the bird may work very well at first but it's also not uncommon for that same bird at a later date to not only be screaming again but also be attacking the squirt bottle, or for some birds to become fearful down the road or other problems...so by using a quick fix solution you run the risk of seeing side effects later on.

Wouldn't it be fun to learn more about Applied Behavior Analysis? To learn how to become a better observer of behaviors? How about learning about avoiding or being able to work out behavioral problems with your parrot, dog, cat, spouse or children? Working towards life long solutions by building a positive relationship base.

It is possible and learning about ABC's gives you the tools to do that.

Suggested resources:

Good Bird Magazine <http://www.goodbirdinc.com/>

Good Bird, Book <http://www.thebirdbrain.com/html/BooksForUs.cfm>

The Parrot Problem Solver <http://www.thebirdbrain.com/html/BooksForUs.cfm>

Yahoo Chat list PBAS <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ParrotBAS/>

(Parrot Behavior Analysis Solutions)

Living and Learning with Parrots online Workshop:

<http://www.behaviorworks.org/>

Susan Friedman's Articles

<http://www.thegabrielfoundation.org/HTML/friedman.htm>

Suggested reading list:

<http://www.thegabrielfoundation.org/HTML/LLPreading.htm>