

Punishment

By Shauna Roberts

Punishment is the process of reducing the strength of a behavior with consequences. Positive punishment is the process of reducing a behavior by adding an aversive consequence contingent on the behavior occurring. Ethically positive punishment is rarely if ever considered and the very LAST resort for changing behavior and only after all other avenues have been tried. It should NEVER be used on a parrot yet I continue to see it used on companion parrots and in some cases it may even be defended or excuses made by people professing to love their bird. It puzzles me although in most cases it may simply a matter of what a person learns or has been shown by others and then not questioning those methods. I have also seen cases where one should know better, having the knowledge not to use punishment yet punishment is used by them so I have to assume that it's still a case of not thinking their actions through. The majority of us would not knowingly sabotage our parrot relationships or hurt our parrots.

The first example of punishment that I observed was back in 1994 at a pet shop where a baby bird was beaking the hand of its hand feeder. The person suddenly thumped the baby on the beak and explained that it was a way to teach the bird not to bite. Not being comfortable with the method I never used it and later learned that the beak contains several nerve endings and is actually quite sensitive. It may be that thumping will teach some birds not to bite but at what expense? Unfortunately this method is still being taught in some circles.

The next punishment strategy I learned about was the "evil eye", which has been a popular suggestion in the past. With the evil eye you frown and look at your bird with an angry face staring at your bird and saying "No!". I tried this strategy and other punishment strategies when my [what was the target behavior?] young male Umbrella Cockatoo who was just under two years old with great results or were they? He stopped what he was doing, backed away from me and feathers went over up his beak. After about 5 minutes he resumed normal activities. I was positively reinforced because the target behavior had been stopped so I used it again and again it worked! I tried it a third time when Casper was around 2 or 3 yrs old and did it work again? Nope! I had a male Cockatoo giving me the look of death as his eyes went slightly oval and he grabbed and held one of my fingers. In my mind it appeared as though he felt I was challenging him and if I wanted to keep my fingers, nose and other body parts I had better back down, now. I immediately learned my lesson. No more evil eye or saying no. My reward for ditching the evil eye was an even better and more even tempered relationship with Casper. The best teachers in my case have been my birds by observing and respecting their individual body language.

What about scary objects? This is something that has been used by some to keep a bird out of trouble such as not climbing down its cage or play stand or flying where they may not want the wood work chewed. There is a much better solution for this scenario! Reinforce your bird for staying on the desired area so that it decides to stay and wants to stay in the designated spot. That way it doesn't have to live with constant fear or threat of the stuffed pink bunny or whatever terrifying object that was placed in its view. Life tends to feel so much better without impending threats that you need to keep an eye on while you're suppose to be enjoying yourself.

Squirting a screaming bird with water has been an advice that's been around for years. Of course if the bird likes being spraying with water as many of them do then its a good thing for the bird but since the owner is reinforcing the screaming behavior its not very effective for the owner. Of course if the owner isn't happy the bird may be in jeopardy of losing its home due to increased screaming behavior. For many birds being squirted with water is punishment so the screaming may decrease but the result could

be a bird that may be afraid to bathe and certainly not comfortable with a spray bottle . Possible side effects could be: fear, plucking or biting as well.

Positive reinforcement not only builds a trusting foundation for a relationship but is so much easier to use! Instead of trying to punish, reinforce the bird for being quiet and making accepted vocalizations (“hello”, “hi” cooing) as well as enriching the birds environment with toys, outside time (weather permitting) exercise time (walking, playing, flapping, flying) and fun positive reinforcement training sessions.

Tails are a sensitive area on a bird and if we don't pay attention when a bird steps up onto our hand while we lift the bird and accidentally bang its tail on the perch then the result may be a bird that is less likely to step up in the future. Hitting the tail during the step up punish stepping up, the very behavior we want. I have also witnessed people flicking a birds tail with their fingers to get a startle out of a bird, like playfully teasing it. This can startle any bird but perhaps more so if its a species like an Eclectus or Grey. The only thing the action might teach a bird is to either bite or begin to be leery of people. The act itself reminds me when I was a kid watching the playground bullies tease or scare other children and laugh. It's reinforcing for the bully but not at all fun for the recipient. Since there's no reason for this particular action the only suggestion is to not to do it, your bird will be calmer if not being teased in this manner.

There are many more punishment strategies that most of us have seen or experienced first hand. Truly respecting birds for the incredible creatures they are may make us less likely to ever resort to punishment which should never be an option in the first place. Possible side effects of punishment with birds could be biting, plucking, screaming, fearfulness such as not wanting to step up, flinging to the cage bottom when people approach, lunging. If punishment can teach us anything at all I hope the lesson is to use positive reinforcement instead. Successfully living with parrots means providing a successful environment for them and if or when that environment isn't working then making any necessary changes or experimenting to see what works better. Use positive reinforcement with birds and empower them to make decisions about what they choose or not choose to do. And if all else fails then use a correctly implemented time out (negative punishment).

Positive punishment does not belong in a relationship and certainly not a parrot human relationship.

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