

# A Framework for Solving Behavior Problems: Functional Assessment and Intervention Planning

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## *Abstract*

Behavior problems exhibited by exotic pets are frequently the impetus for caregivers to seek help from veterinary professionals. One barrier to helping caregivers resolve these problems is the commonly held view that behavior is something an animal has rather than something it does, given certain conditions. By identifying and changing the conditions in which problem behaviors occur, these inappropriate behaviors can be replaced with appropriate behaviors, and caregivers and pets will experience more success living together. Functional assessment is a set of procedures used to identify the functionally related environmental conditions that maintain problem behaviors. These procedures have been well validated within the field of applied behavior analysis, particularly with children exhibiting severe behavior problems. Functional assessment appears to have wide applicability to pets and other animals in captivity as well. The outcome of a good functional assessment is a summary statement that includes: 1) a clear, observable description of the problem behavior; 2) the general and immediate environmental conditions that predict the behavior; and 3) the purpose the behavior serves for the animal (e.g., the consequences the behavior produces). With this information, environmental changes can be made to make the problem behavior irrelevant, inefficient, and ineffective. Without this information, the wrong behavior may inadvertently be reinforced. At the same time, alternate behaviors that are acceptable to the caregivers can be reinforced to meet the same, or different, functions for the animal. A framework for accomplishing a functional assessment and systematic intervention planning is presented. Copyright 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

*Key words:* functional assessment; analysis; problem behavior; exotic animal

Understandably, too few veterinary professionals are aware of the behavior-change technology known as applied behavior analysis. Until recently, this technology was mainly applied to human learners, especially in the area of special education. More comprehensive than basic operant conditioning procedures, applied behavior analysis offers a sharp set of well-validated tools for providing positive behavioral support to individuals exhibiting problem behaviors and their families. Functional assessment is one of these tools. It is the

first step to accurately assessing what is going on and why—two essential building blocks for developing

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1557-5063/07/1601-\$30.00

doi:10.1053/j.jepm.2006.11.003

effective intervention plans. The relevance of applying a teaching technology to exotic pets that has been used extensively for solving human behavior problems is made clear in the following description of behavior by O'Neill and coworkers<sup>1</sup>:

Problem behaviors may take many forms, such as self-injurious hits, bites, violent and aggressive attacks, destruction of property, and other seriously disruptive behaviors (such as screaming and tantrums). The individuals who exhibit problem behaviors may be labeled in a variety of ways . . . or they may carry no formal diagnostic labels.

Problem behaviors often are a source of confusion and frustration. In many situations, problem behaviors may not only be dangerous but may also seem inexplicable. Such patterns of behavior do not fit with the way we think the world should work and often don't make sense to people in the throes of the dilemma created by their occurrence.

As you may have guessed, the above quote refers to children with severe behavior problems. Yet, this description might apply to the problem behaviors exhibited by exotic pets that lead their owners to seek help from veterinary professionals. Indeed, behavior analysis addresses problem behaviors at a level that cuts across species, that is, behavior-environment relations. Functional assessment is used to identify both the environmental events and conditions that set the occasion for a problem behavior to occur and the outcome that gives the behavior purpose. With this information, we can better generate effective, efficient, and humane intervention plans to keep pets welcome and thriving in their homes.

## Working with Behavior and Conditions, Not Labels

One of the biggest barriers to providing effective behavioral support is the idea that behavior is something an animal has, instead of something an animal does, given certain conditions. Behavior occurs in contexts, not in animals. When we think the problem occurs in animals, we naturally try to change the animal; when we think the problem occurs in contexts, we try to change the context instead.<sup>1</sup> Rather than describing behavior in terms of personality traits or diagnostic labels (e.g., the chinchilla is a biter; the parrot is psychotic), the goal of functional assessment is to describe problem behavior situations. Using labels can result in serious liabilities for the animal for the following reasons:

1. Labels are based on circular reasoning that is not scientifically verifiable.

2. Labels become self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>2</sup>
3. Labels predispose us to using ineffective, forceful, or harmful strategies.
4. Labels create a false sense of having explained behavior, when all we have done is given it a name, ending the search for actual causes we can do something about.<sup>3</sup>
5. Labels provide excuses to get rid of the pet.

Consider the lack of useful information provided by a pet owner who describes his/her parrot as vicious. Exchange the label for a clear description of overt behavior, what the parrot does that can be observed: The parrot bites. Add to that description the antecedent conditions that predict the behavior: When I put my hand in his cage, the parrot bites. Last, include the purpose for the behavior, that is, the consequence it produces for the bird: When I put my hand in his cage, the parrot bites, and I remove my hand. This summary statement is what is needed to design an effective intervention.

## Functional Assessment

The outcome of a good functional assessment is 4-fold. First is a description of the problem behavior in unambiguous, observable terms. Second is the identification of the general and immediate physical and environmental conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur, and also the conditions under which it does not occur. Third is information about the purpose the behavior serves the animal, or the outcomes or consequences that reinforce (e.g., maintain or increase) the behavior. Fourth is the development of a summary statement in which the information is combined. The functional assessment of problem behavior provides the basis for building a behavior change plan, which entails targeting existing alternate or new behaviors and redesigning the environment to promote and maintain them. Without this information, we may inadvertently make the problem behavior worse with a faulty solution.

The steps for conducting a functional assessment are as follows:

1. Observe and operationally define the target behavior.
  - a. What does the animal do that can be observed and measured?
2. Identify the general and immediate physical and environmental antecedents that predict the behavior.

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