

Small Mammal Training in the Veterinary Practice

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KEYWORDS

• Positive reinforcement • Training • Veterinary • Rabbit • Rodent • Ferret

KEY POINTS

- In the past, veterinary intervention involving small mammals often resulted in creating a fearful patient as well as damaging the bond the patient may have had with the client.
- Desensitization, counterconditioning, and positive reinforcement training are all excellent strategies to reduce fear in small mammal patients both in and outside of the veterinary practice.
- Clients can use positive reinforcement to train a number of simple health care behaviors at home, creating a patient that will willingly participate in veterinary interventions.
- Veterinary staff members have many opportunities during an office visit to positively impact a small mammal patient and build a bond of trust with both the patient and the client.



Videos of training of rats, rabbits, and guinea pigs accompany this article at <http://www.vetexotic.theclinics.com/>

INTRODUCTION

Veterinarians take an oath that includes the statement “I will... use my scientific knowledge and skills for ... the prevention and relief of animal suffering.” This has been at the heart of veterinary practice for decades even as veterinarians were not always aware of additional suffering inadvertently caused by their intervention. It was the lesser of two evils to cure the disease that might have killed, even though the patient may have been left in a state of fear when exposed to the veterinary staff and the client who administered the care. Many a trusting relationship between caregiver and companion animal has suffered serious and sometimes permanent damage in the aftermath of veterinary intervention.¹ Animals restrained overzealously and forced to endure aversive experiences can also be dangerous to the handler as they struggle to escape.¹ Small mammal patients often run frantically around their cages before being forcefully and quickly grabbed, bringing all 4 feet off the ground in order to be

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examined. The “chase-grab-lift” scenario mimics a life-threatening predatory chase-and-capture situation. This stressful event might occur once or twice a day if the animal has to be treated for a disorder.

Over the past 20 years, increasing numbers of zoological parks and laboratories have successfully used positive reinforcement training to teach many species of animals to choose to cooperate in their own health care. The welfare of the animals is improved because heavy-handed restraint is eliminated, fear responses decrease significantly, the physiological changes of stress are reduced and the animals expand their repertoire of behaviors resulting in behavioral enrichment.^{2–9} It has become popular in recent years to teach health care behaviors to cats, dogs, and parrots. Dog and cat trainers are conducting classes in veterinary clinics where puppies and kittens and their caregivers have positively reinforcing experiences with veterinary staff and the clinic environment. Parrots are also being trained using positive reinforcement to tolerate veterinary examinations and treatments.¹⁰ This exciting movement is creating a new generation of companion animals that come to the veterinarian experienced, confident, and willing to cooperate in routine health care activities. This can be done with exotic small mammal patients as well.

The set of behaviors referred to in this chapter as “health care behaviors” may also be referred to as husbandry behaviors and/or medical behaviors. Health care behaviors include any behaviors performed by an animal that allows it to participate willingly in grooming, transportation, examination, medicating (topical, oral, or parenteral), and common diagnostic procedures. **Box 1** lists some common health care behaviors that are valuable to train. Once a behavior is trained, the key to the animal’s success performing the behavior is a rich history of positive reinforcement built through many repetitions under nonaversive situations so that the animal predicts a positive valuable outcome each time. On the occasions when the procedure may be aversive, such as a bitter instead of palatable oral medication, the animal has such a dense history of

Box 1

Health care behaviors to train

- *Recall*: Approaching when called.
- *Crating*: Going into and coming out of a carrier and being moved in a carrier.
- *Being picked up and carried*: Or stepping onto an open hand.
- *Toweling*: Being able to be lightly restrained with a towel.
- *Examining*: Being able to apply pressure to and move various parts of the body.
- *Targeting*: Touching a body part to a target. This can be used for positioning or creating movement such as:
 - Getting onto and off of a scale
 - Staying in one area of the cage while it is cleaned (stationing)
 - Standing still while being treated/examined
 - Coming out of a cage
 - Standing in a clear box to be examined
- Oral, ear, and eye medicating
- Nail trimming
- Fur brushing

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