

# Teaching Avian Patients and Caregivers in the Examination Room

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## KEYWORDS

- Positive reinforcement • Parrot • Behavior • Veterinary • Physical examination
- Targeting • Toweling • Medicating

## KEY POINTS

- Animal behavior is infrequently addressed by the veterinarian in clinical practice.
- Companion parrot behavior is that of wild, not domesticated, species.
- Parrots presented in a veterinary setting often avoid touch or examination.
- Using positive reinforcement techniques can enable the veterinarian to handle parrots more effectively.
- Veterinarians can teach these techniques to parrots and caregivers during a routine examination setting.



A video of target training accompanies this article <http://www.vetexotic.theclinics.com/>

## INTRODUCTION

“First, do no harm.” Veterinary professionals are all familiar with this essential axiom in the art of veterinary medical practice. Veterinarians are trained as scientists. They are taught to observe objectively, weigh and measure all normal and abnormal conditions in their patients, perform appropriate testing, diagnose disease, perform surgery, and prescribe treatment. This all works well in theory but the reality of providing care for companion animals, especially birds, presents many obstacles.

Working with species of parrots that are intelligent, undomesticated companions make veterinarians’ efforts quite challenging. Many avian patients, with good reason, show extreme fear responses toward people associated with veterinary care. Many clients report that their relationship with their birds has suffered serious damage as a result of attempting to medicate and treat a variety of conditions. The patient

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survives the disease process—but at what cost to the human-bird bond? At what cost to the veterinarian-client-patient relationship?

Veterinarians face the problem of communication with their patients and also with their clients. Veterinarians seldom adequately address the challenges of client compliance and actual patient aftercare in the home. Goals of veterinary professionals should match those of the companion animal caregivers: providing the best and simplest husbandry practices and treating diseases effectively and safely.

Clients are exposed to various resources in this age of information technology that help and hinder a veterinarian's effort to provide care for a patient. The outdated information and mythology on avian behavior still available today can have strong repercussions for veterinary care. These often result in patients who have learned fear responses or aggressive behavior in response to humans' attempts to interact. The resources listed and references cited in this article are ones the author recommends as the most reliable, humane, and easiest teaching methods available.

### LEARNING ABOUT TRAINING

To prepare for teaching clients, veterinary professionals must familiarize themselves with the basic principles of behavior analysis with an emphasis on positive reinforcement. The most comprehensive and reliable resources now available for learning about avian behavior include the following:

- Echols, M. Scott, DVM. Captive foraging: The next best thing to being free. Zoologic Education Network, 2006. <http://avianstudios.com/products/captive-foraging-dvd/>
- Friedman, Susan G., PhD Living & learning with parrots: the fundamental principles and procedures of teaching and learning. Online course. [www.behaviorworks.org](http://www.behaviorworks.org)
- Heidenreich, Barbara. Books, DVDs, Good Bird Magazine and more. [www.goodbirdinc.com](http://www.goodbirdinc.com)
- Johnson, Melinda. Getting started: clicker training for birds. Sunshine Books, Inc, 2004. <http://store.clickertraining.com/clforbi.html>
- Morrow, Linda. Clicking with birds: clicker training your companion parrot: a beginners guide. 2002. <http://www.avitrain.com/manual.html>
- Pryor, Karen. Don't shoot the dog: the new art of teaching and training. Bantam Books, 1999. <http://www.clickertraining.com/?source=sthplug>

Just 13 years ago there were very few resources on avian behavior. The only resources available focused on information gathered from anecdotal experience. None of these avian behavior resources were very effective or humane in resolving the most common undesirable behaviors in companion birds. All resources in this article detail the science of behavior analysis and the mechanics of positive reinforcement training in a format easily understood and accessible to anyone interested in parrot behavior.

The principles of behavior work with all species of animals (including humans). Some effort and perseverance is necessary to understand the concepts and how to apply them. However, the value of understanding the science of applied behavioral analysis cannot be underestimated. At the very least, veterinarians can become familiar with the practical application of positive reinforcement training. They then can then easily introduce this concept to clients during a visit to the clinic with their companion parrot (See the articles by Heidenreich and Farhoody elsewhere in this issue.).

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