The IAABC Journal
A publication of The IAABC Foundation

Best of 2020 Collection

http://iaabcjournal.org
CONTENTS

GENERAL 3
Dr. Susan G. Friedman

CAT DIVISION 14
Scratch This, Not That!
Denise Johnson DVM

PARROT DIVISION 21
Pandemic Poultry Purchasing
Maisie Wake

DOG DIVISION 30
The Effect of Environmental Enrichment on Dog Behavior
Rebecca Hunt and Dr. Helen Vaterlaws-Whiteside

WORKING ANIMALS 36
The Politics of Identity in Hunting Dogs
Teresa Tyler

SHELTER DIVISION 43
Socially Conscious Sheltering
Dot Baisly and Mara Velez

HORSE DIVISION 48
Target Training for Horses
Trudi Dempsey

ABOUT THE JOURNAL
The IAABC Journal is a peer reviewed quarterly collection of articles and case studies from all over the world of animal training, research, behavior, and welfare.

Each issue covers species from dogs and cats to horses, parrots, exotic animals and livestock.

The Journal is free to read for everyone, supported by our members and sponsors. For more information, email journal@iaabc.org.

ABOUT THE IAABC FOUNDATION
The IAABC Foundation was launched in 2020, with the mission to inspire, develop, and provide quality, evidence-based education, research, and other charitable activities in animal training and behavior.
WHY ANIMALS NEED TRAINERS WHO ADHERE TO THE LEAST INTRUSIVE PRINCIPLE: IMPROVING ANIMAL WELFARE AND HONING TRAINERS’ SKILLS

SUSAN G. FRIEDMAN, PH.D.

A typical debate about negative reinforcement is something like a train wreck – you don’t want to stare but you can’t look away. Some trainers argue negative reinforcement has a place in animal training; others say it does not. With some recent interest in the animal training community in the basic research on negative reinforcement, it’s a good time to check our understanding of why animals need trainers who adhere to the least intrusive principle. This principle has inspired development of procedural hierarchies in our field (see Friedman 2008) and others (e.g., bioethics, see Byskov) that provide a framework for discussing negative reinforcement in the larger, applied context.

Let’s review what negative reinforcement is in this context, because this particular combination of words can easily trip us up. Negative reinforcement is the process that strengthens escape and avoidance behavior. Looking at each word separately may help keep it straight. Reinforcement always means one thing — the process by which consequences strengthen behavior. Negative always means one thing — removal (think subtraction as in arithmetic; do not think unpleasant as in value). For example, when you steer clear of a snake on the trail, that’s escape behavior. When you hike on a different trail from then on, that’s avoidance (prevention) behavior. Distance from the snake is the negative reinforcer. The snake is the aversive stimulus — the change in the environment that we behave to escape on the path and avoid in the future. On one hand, the natural world is full of examples of negative reinforcement influencing animals’ behavior (and at least some plants). On the other hand, the natural world is also full of arsenic, so the naturalness of something may not be the best rationale for our training decisions. Still, no doubt about it — life is full of aversive stimuli, and it is an essential life skill to escape and avoid them. We know that when escape behavior is repeatedly blocked, learned helplessness can follow (e.g., Overmier & Seligman).

It is self-evident that animals’ welfare increases as the number of aversive stimuli in their environment decreases. My hope for the animals in our care is that they don’t have occasion to use escape or avoidance behavior very often, even though they are equipped to do so.

ETHICS

I was privileged to work on a project with Dr. Bernard Rollin, one of the world’s foremost experts on animal ethics and ethics in veterinary medicine. During this collaboration, I learned I will need another lifetime to gain a thimble full of what this field offers. So, when it comes to ethics, I’d say I am a simple thinker. The Merriam-Webster dictionary states, ‘ethics tends to suggest aspects of universal fairness and the question of whether or not an action is responsible.’

Ethical considerations are about value judgments; science is not. Einstein (1941) said, “For science can only ascertain what is, but not what should be, and outside of its domain value judgments of all kinds remain necessary.” Of course, there will always be debates about rules of professional behavior. But, this by itself does not discount the need for them. Rather, it confirms the need to continue civil, informed discussion if we are to inch closer to compromise and consensus. The challenge is to balance trainers’ individual freedom to change behavior by any means and a professional standard built on the least intrusive, effective means.

We have a full toolbox of effective, science-based training procedures, but from an ethical perspective, effectiveness is not enough.

LEAST INTRUSIVE PRINCIPLE

Every profession has ethical standards followed by members in good standing, and many of them include the least intrusive principle (aka least invasive principle, least restrictive alternative, least intrusive intervention/mandate/doctrine/means). Across the board, intrusiveness refers to the degree of counter-control, choice, and consent, for the learner (client, patient, etc.) – a concept as relevant to the welfare of non-human animals as to people. Let’s connect the dots: If we were to change the name of the least-to-most intrusive hierarchy to the most-to-least control hierarchy, it would be the same concept. Of course, all codes can be abused and, as with any living document, the hierarchy can evolve over time. Nonetheless, professional standards are generally protective of both the provider and the receiver of professional expertise.

Mental health, special education, medicine, bioethics, and law are just a few examples of professions that recognize the least intrusive principle. In special
education there is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq. (2010). In bioethics there is the Nuffield Council of Bioethics intervention ladder (cited in Byskov). And, in constitutional law there is Florida. v. Royer, 460 U.S. 491, 500 (1983), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "the investigative methods employed should be the least intrusive means reasonably available to verify or dispel the [law enforcement] officer's suspicion in a short period of time." It is a pressing issue when the least intrusive principle is not adhered to as intended in any of these professions. That said, this problem won't be solved by having no procedural guidance at all. Imagine the malpractice that would occur without the least intrusive principle. In fact, we don't have to imagine, we know what a lack of professional accountability looks like and it is horrific.

I first advocated for the least intrusive principle regarding the selection of training procedures in my animal learning seminars and conference presentations in the early 2000s. I had worked with this mandate for around 25 years prior to that time as a special educator, applied behavior analyst, and psychology professor. The implementation of the least intrusive intervention that is likely to be effective is an ethical guideline recognized within the area of applied behavior analysis (Shook, 2002, as cited in Carter & Wheeler, 2005, p. 1375). It's also part of the code of ethics for board certified behavior analysts: "4.09 Least Restrictive Procedures. Behavior analysts review and appraise the restrictiveness of procedures and always recommend the least restrictive procedures likely to be effective."

In time, I put pen to paper and wrote the article, "What's Wrong with This Picture: Effectiveness Is Not Enough" (Friedman, 2008). Readers are encouraged to review this article at my website for behavioral examples at each level on the hierarchy and other details not repeated here.

As a tool for applying the least intrusive principle, I devised a figure in which operant training procedures were arranged hierarchically from the least intrusive to most intrusive intervention (see Figure 1 for a recent version). The article and hierarchy graphic have been translated into 12 languages that I know of, presented at conferences by countless colleagues, and have been included in the ethical standards of professional animal training and behavior consulting organizations, and zoological facilities around the world. Clearly, the least intrusive principle and hierarchy tool filled a need among animal training professionals who found themselves at odds with the cultural legacy of indiscriminate force and coercion of animals in human care.

As explained in the article, this hierarchy is an expanded conceptualization of a four-category hierarchy of behavior-reduction procedures introduced in early and current editions of a behavior analysis text written for teachers by Alberto & Troutman who wrote,

"When one is considering behavior reduction, the least intrusive intervention is the least aversive or lowest on the hierarchy. The teacher should determine, based on a hierarchy of procedures from the least intrusive to the most intrusive (most positive to most aversive), an effective procedure that is in the positive range of available choices."9

The authors also set forth these important implementation details:

• If a less intrusive procedure will accomplish the desired behavior change, it is neither necessary nor ethical to use a more intrusive procedure.

• If the choice is between a less intrusive but ineffective procedure and a more aversive but effective procedure, then the effective procedure should be selected.

• Before a more intrusive procedure is employed, data should be collected to substantiate the ineffectiveness of the less intrusive procedure.

Thus, the least intrusive principle doesn't preclude the use of negative reinforcement (or punishment for that matter) per se, rather, it limits the use of negative reinforcement when it isn't necessary (i.e., when less intrusive strategies will be equally effective). Progression along the continuum of intrusiveness should be data-based, and not based on convenience, authority, or politics. Data collection needn't be exhaustive or burdensome. Just a few baseline repetitions or a retrospective report from a reliable observer may be all that is needed to justify moving along the intrusiveness continuum.

So, how can we know that, for any individual, positive reinforcement-based procedures will be equally effective and efficient? We try them— or at the least we provide a compelling rationale for why we will not that is consistent with the profession's ethical mandate (see the section below, When the Function Is Escape). At the same time, we should be alert for misleading arguments about the aversive properties of positive reinforcement that are better understood as the misuse of food reinforcers or just plain poor training (see the section below, When Positive Reinforcement Is Coercive).

**CONTROL AND ANIMAL WELFARE**
It is a small step from understanding that behavior is an evolved tool to achieve functional outcomes to realizing that control over outcomes matters in the lives of all animals. There is no dearth of scientific evidence across several different levels of analysis (e.g., behavioral, neuro, ethological) revealing the direct correlation between control over one's own outcomes and animal welfare (for more examples, see Friedman, 2005). As discussed in a review of literature by Leotti, Iyengar, and Ochsner (2010), “Converging evidence from animal research, clinical studies and neuroimaging work suggest that the need for control is a biological imperative for survival, and a corticostriatal network is implicated as the neural substrate of this adaptive behavior.”

Most of us are skilled at force and coercion due to a lifetime of personal experience with these approaches and too few models showing us less intrusive, effective means with which to influence behavior. Thus, for many people aversive procedures are the default solution to behavior challenges. It will always be easier (requiring little or no skill) and sometimes (but by no means always) faster to spray a troop of monkeys with a hose to shift them from one enclosure to another, to push an owl onto the glove with pressure on its abdomen, and to keep a dog in the heel position with a choke collar.

Alternatively, it takes skill — the result of knowledge and experience — to use positive reinforcement to shape behaviors like shifting from one space to another, stepping onto a glove, and heeling on cue. This is where contemporary trainers excel; this is the deep expertise offered by our profession. We are expert at changing behavior by changing conditions with a minimum of force and coercion.

The ever-improving science and technology of behavior change have been available for well over half a century. With the abundance of internet courses, workshops, conferences and mentors, gaining these skills has never been more possible. To adhere to the least intrusive principle, trainers must have expertise in identifying unwell animals, and using antecedent arrangement and positive reinforcement, prompting and fading, shaping new behaviors, strengthening appropriate alternative behaviors, and functional assessment.

We have a choice to make about the means by which we accomplish our behavior goals that should be represented field-wide to improve accountability, as has been done in so many other professions. Frankly, I just cannot figure out why in this day and age, professionals working with animals should not be held similarly accountable. Can you?

WHEN THE FUNCTION IS ESCAPE

The ethics and efficacy of teaching new behaviors with skilled use of less intrusive procedures (antecedent arrangement and positive reinforcement) is clear to most contemporary trainers. But what about behavior problems? In applied behavior analysis, the first step is assessing why the behavior occurs by asking, WTF? (What's the function?) What does the animal get, or get away from, by behaving this way in these conditions? Possible functional outcomes include consequential stimuli and events such as attention, tangible items, escaping aversive stimuli, and sensory reinforcement.

There is inherent value in solving a behavior problem by providing the same functional outcomes produced by the problem behavior with an acceptable alternative behavior instead. After all, if the outcomes were not important to the individual, it would not be behaving to achieve those outcomes in the first place. New skills should also be taught with positive reinforcement to expand the learner’s repertoire, as freedom is about big skill repertoires.

For example, a parrot who lunges to remove the caregiver’s hand can be taught that the hand will be removed contingent (dependent) on the parrot leaning back instead (an acceptable alternative behavior to escape the hand). At the same time, or soon after, a positive reinforcement shaping program can be implemented to teach enthusiastic stepping onto the hand (building new skills).

The reason I bring up this example is to illustrate a case in which negative reinforcement might be a reasonable first choice. The above intervention follows the least intrusive principle by increasing leaning back (the alternative behavior) with negative reinforcement rather than decreasing lunging with punishment. As the function of escaping the hand is accomplished by leaning back, lunging often decreases without direct intervention. It appears that the freedom to effectively say no is an abolishing operation for (i.e., demotivates) escape behavior.

But are there less intrusive procedures than negative reinforcement that we can use to solve the problem of the lunging parrot? One approach would be to use a stimulus-stimulus procedure (S-S) in which food immediately follows the presentation of the hand independent of a behavioral criterion (non-contingently). Starting at a distance at which the parrot remains calm (a criterion requiring operationalization) we could gradually close the distance between the bird and the hand with this strategy.

However, two problems with this solution...
may arise: First is how to get the food to the parrot before it has learned to be calm in close proximity to the hand. Perhaps this could be readily solved with a very long perch and a mounted food cup. Second, and more relevant to my point, is that many animals will not eat food in the same conditions that evoke escape. Pushing food to the hand by throwing food into their mouths can be inadvertently coercive. Even for those animals that willingly eat food when escape is the functional reinforcer, food is an arbitrary consequence to offer the learner. That is, the bird isn’t lunging to get food; the bird is lunging to remove the hand.

It goes without saying that many trainers have had great success using food reinforcers within a differential reinforcement of alternative (or incompatible) behavior intervention even when the function of the problem behavior was not food. For example, we often replace a puppy’s unwanted behavior of biting shoes by differentially reinforcing with treats the behavior of stationing on a mat (see Kiki Yablon training Frieda with treats the behavior of stationing on a mat). Once the unwanted behavior is a mat (see Kiki Yablon training Frieda with treats the behavior of stationing on a mat instead of biting shoes by differentially reinforcing with treats the behavior of stationing on a mat) we (and the learner) lose a reinforcer for training. For example, feeding an animal before or while an injection is administered may result in the animal refusing food in those conditions, as food predicts discomfort. See Sdao (2018) for a more in-depth discussion of these consequence traps. At the same time, we know of many examples of successful positive reinforcement training programs (and classical conditioning programs) that changed animals’ behavior from aggressive to calm in the presence of aversive stimuli (see Emma Parsons’ updated book The Click to Calm Primer).

What can I say? Sometimes the more you feel like staying in bed! However, gaining a better understanding of these intricacies helps us make better training decisions and meet our goal of using least intrusive, effective procedures.

ACkowledging Dissent

In the 20 years or so that I have been disseminating the least intrusive principle to the animal training community, I have heard dissent – sometimes absurd, but most often thought-provoking and worthy of consideration. So, I share several of those opinions and my responses here as well.

1. “The hierarchy is not supported by...
2. “Given my experience training this species, I am able to quickly surmise what procedures will and will not work, so why take the time to step through less intrusive procedures?” I must admit to my own hubris here as I too have boasted that I can predict what a kid will do from 20 feet away. However, this is really profiling what a learner will do in the future based on what other animals have done in the past. The risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy is too great (for a discussion of how others’ expectations of an individual affect that individual’s performance, see Rosenthal, 199821). We know well that in our work, behavior is always a study of one and thus, we would do better to predict what an animal is likely to do based on that animal’s own data (a shameless plug for taking baseline data before intervening on a learner’s functional behavior). If a teacher told me that, based on experience with 100 other children, they wanted to start with negative reinforcement to change my child’s behavior, I would find a different teacher. It’s not that I don’t trust or value professional experience or the latent database it produces (aka intuition). My objection is that no one should predict the limits of a learner’s behavior until we have data from that individual; and even then, caution is warranted. The detrimental fallout of aversive procedures is too costly to rely on such fortune-telling (see Sidman, 1989).22

3. “Positive reinforcement can be coercive and negative reinforcement can be just information (a discriminative stimulus)” Agreed, and this is an important consideration. Nature is messy. A too-hungry cat can be taught to go into a crate with food reinforcers – is the cat behaving to get food (positive reinforcement) or to escape hunger (negative reinforcement)? A tug on the left rein can cue a galloping horse to turn back toward the stable – is the horse behaving to get home or escape pressure from the rein? Or is it both processes at once? In such cases, where multiple alternative analyses exist, we have to ask: How can we know? What are the criteria? How will we measure it? Sometimes the difference between positive and negative reinforcement can be inferred from the learner’s body language, which is typically very different in approach conditions than escape or avoidance conditions. We need to assess the whole picture, patterns of behavior and conditions, to shine a light on the processes influencing behavior in any given case. This requires that we become detailed observers of behavior and conditions (note — not just behavior). 

4. “Common applications of negative reinforcement are so aversive (e.g., shock collars and ear pinches) that the procedure should be on a level of its own, closer to positive punishment.” Indeed, the continuum of aversiveness is long, ranging from mild to strong. One argument for leaving the hierarchy as it stands is that before a highly aversive event functions as a negative reinforcer, it likely punishes the preceding behavior. Positive punishment is, generally speaking, the most intrusive intervention.

It’s a complicated planet. There will always be exceptions that prove (or proof) the rule. These interesting branches off the main trunk of the hierarchy provide welcome opportunities for further discussion, clarification, and revision to improve animal welfare through our training choices.

CONCLUSION: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

There is abundant evidence that animals are learners who share with humans the fundamental principles of behavior change. Animals are neither commodities nor stimulus-response reflex machines. This understanding has blown the lid off the relevance of training to animal welfare. Still, there is so much more to discover about the procedures we use to teach our learners. As I wrote in the original 2008 article, the commitment to using the least intrusive, effective intervention encourages us to think before we act, so that we make choices about the means by which we accomplish our behavior goals and not just the outcomes. When more intrusive procedures are not necessary, we should not use them, regardless of rationales based on personal recipes or canned protocols.

When we do find it necessary to escalate to more intrusive procedures, it should be done with a big enough bank account of positive reinforcers to withstand the withdrawal. Big bank accounts are the result of providing animals with a lifestyle of control over outcomes, freedom to choose, and a voice to say no (see Friedman, 2012).22 Trainers should continue to improve their behavior science knowledge and their observation, analysis and training skills, so that it is never the case that animals pay the price for our deficits. This will require a new infrastructure in which new trainers have access to information and supervision by experienced, knowledgeable mentors in both behavior analysis and training.

Sometimes addressing the function of a behavior (i.e., escape behavior) leads us to negative reinforcement interventions. In this case, data should be collected first that substantiates the need for moving along the hierarchy. Sometimes the lack of effectiveness of a procedure is due to the animal’s lack of the prerequisite skills necessary to meet the target criterion. This possibility should be evaluated and addressed instead of defaulting to more intrusive procedures. Even the most effective trainers have occasion to ask, “Why is this animal failing to meet an appropriate criterion?” The answer should be sought in the conditions we, the trainers, provide, not inside the animal.

As defined by Sidman (1993), coercion is the control of behavior through punishment (or the threat of punishment) or negative reinforcement (the removal of punishment).24 In his advocacy of positive reinforcement methods, he wrote: “The occasional need to use coercion to deal with emergencies does not justify the advocacy of coercion as a principle of therapy. What basic and applied behavior analysts can offer that is new and constructive are positive reinforcement techniques for teaching new behavior and stimulus-control techniques for establishing...
cognitive repertoires” (p. 95).

Ultimately, applying the least intrusive principle to animal training requires a good understanding of how the fundamental principles of learning work (the world as it is) and how we choose to use them (the world as we want it to be), that is, both science and ethics. A profession-wide standard based on the least intrusive principle moves us closer to that goal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Kiki Yablon for her thoughtful review of the final draft of this paper, and to Dr. Cynthia Stringfield, Ken Ramirez, Rick Hester, and Steve Martin and the NEI TEC team for their helpful comments.

REFERENCES


DENISE JOHNSON, DVM

SCRATCH THIS, NOT THAT!

Cats scratch for many reasons such as nail care, exercise, tension relief, and communication that includes both physical and chemical messages.¹

Scratching behavior is so innate that even cats who have undergone partial digital amputation, also known as declawing or onychectomy, still attempt to scratch. An individual’s mental and physical health is impacted by their ability to express this normal and healthful behavior.

Unfortunately, cats may target items that their owners are unhappy with them scratching. Damage to property often results in damage to the human-animal bond if not addressed. Pet owners can become frustrated by scratching behavior, resorting to punishment that is often ineffective and further damaging to the bond.

According to one survey, 69.2% of cat owners reported yelling at their cat when attempting to manage destructive scratching; water spraying was reported by 37.4% and 15.4% resorted to spanking their cat.²

In keeping with the principles of LIMA (least intrusive minimally aversive), as behavior consultants we have a responsibility to offer humane solutions that meet the needs of cats as well as achieving results for our clients.

Antecedent arrangement allows us to set everyone up for success, preventing unwanted behavior as well as the impulse to punish.

Simply offering a generic scratching surface may not be sufficient in management of destructive scratching. Each behavior serves a function for the pet, otherwise it would not continue.

CAT DIVISION
The targets that a cat chooses serve a specific function for them, and by looking critically at those targets, we can be strategic in the alternatives that we offer. Provide a scratching surface that meets their needs comprehensively and promote its use to make scratching of the undesirable target irrelevant to the cat.

When collecting a history, assess the current scratching targets as well as the alternatives that have been provided so far. Consider what makes those targets desirable for scratching, looking for unique traits as well as overarching themes if multiple targets are present. Frequency and intensity of use can help clarify which items have the highest value. Scratching schedule can suggest the influence of availability or uncover a specific purpose. For instance, if a bedroom chair is primarily scratched immediately after waking, an alternative option can be made more easily accessible and the chair protected by removal or covering during that time.

When evaluating existing scratching options, look for what is working well and what can be made even better yet. Starting fresh may not be necessary. By optimizing the scratching surfaces that are already in the environment, you can conserve your client’s resources and help them to make the most of their budget. Craftiness is encouraged; items can be reinforced to provide stability, moved for accessibility, or reupholstered to fit texture preferences. While individual preferences vary, studies demonstrate patterns of popular choices among cat.

Furniture, including couches and chairs, is commonly cited as the target of destructive scratching behavior. Couches possess many traits that make them ideal scratching sites. Typically they are very sturdy, allowing cats to perform a full stretch and scratch routine without tipping. Cats commonly scratch after resting, making furniture such as sofas a convenient multi-function resource. In addition to providing lounging areas and scratching opportunities, couches are commonly in areas of social importance. This enhances their value as communication sites, serving a purpose similar to a community message board. Their large surface area gives ample room for physical and chemical marks to be made and offers both vertical and horizontal surfaces for scratching.

Cat trees with at least one level have been associated with a lower incidence of unwanted scratching and can offer many of the same advantages as sofas. Tall trees can offer a height advantage for cats, but must be stabilized to prevent any wobbling or tipping. Choose trees based on the features that take priority for the individual, noting whether horizontal or vertical surfaces are more frequently targeted and whether unique textures may play a role. Fabric is relatively easy to apply to most cat trees, provided the individual is comfortable using a staple gun. Ensure that resting areas are plentiful enough to prevent competition between cats in the household and place them near the existing target to take advantage of established social value and convenience of location. These recommendations also apply to the targeting of wide-based chairs or recliners.

Chairs with legs present different scratching benefits, requiring different alternatives. In addition to providing a stable post to scratch, legs of chairs and tables allow for “peek-a-boo” play. Many cats enjoy hiding behind an item and attacking what lies on the other side, at times wrapping their limbs or claws around the obscuring item in the process. Even if a cat is not intending to target the leg as a scratching substrate, this activity alone can cause damage. The canopy provided by a table or the seat of a chair can also add to a cat’s sense of security.

When individual preferences vary, studies demonstrate patterns of popular choices among cat. Simple vertical scratching posts are among the most common options made available to cats; of those posts, ones with wider bases are associated with greater actual use in the home (Wilson, 2016). This reinforces the importance of stability when determining a suitable scratching substitute. Unused posts should be assessed for stability concerns and secured as needed by increasing the size or weight of the existing base or otherwise anchoring the post. For homes where space restrictions take priority, consider leg wraps that protect the underlying furniture while accommodating the cat’s needs. Commercially available products, such as sisal mat wraps, allow easy application, while do-it-yourself guides allow owners to take an active role in providing for their pets. Owners who are comfortable crafting and customizing solutions for their cat have the choice of wrapping targeted legs in a wide range of materials including sisal, fabric, cotton rope, or carpet.

As a target of undesired scratching, carpeting can cause significant stress to owners. While damage to property of any kind can be upsetting, the cost of carpeting can escalate very quickly and, depending on the housing situation, replacement may be required whether or not it is truly financially feasible. Landlord pressure adds that much more strain to the human-animal bond. Carpet provides a horizontal surface that appeals to many cats, particularly geriatric individuals, and also represents the most commonly offered scratching surface.
It is unclear what leads to this preference among older cats. Considering its popularity as an available substrate, exposure during kittenhood may establish an affinity. It can also represent a more comfortable scratching option for cats experiencing orthopedic discomfort or other health concerns. Cats showing a change in preference should be screened by their veterinarian to rule out potential medical influence. Keep this in mind when offering alternatives; carpeted cat trees are only one of the solutions available. Cats who are targeting carpet due to ease of access and comfort concerns may prefer options such as horizontal cardboard scratchers. Discontinued carpet samples can often be obtained from local flooring stores at little to no cost, providing a buffet of texture and color options.

The power of choice has been found to reduce stress in numerous studies performed in zoo and laboratory settings. Buffets allow cats to exercise choice, giving them more control over their environment and providing valuable information regarding their specific wants. When placed over existing targets, samples or rugs serve a protective role, and function as an appropriate outlet for destructive behavior. Grip mats can be used to prevent sliding, anchoring small samples in place. Location of the target is another important factor to consider and may actually play a greater role than the substrate itself, particularly if other items in the vicinity are also affected.

Walls are not inherently interesting, barring specialty wallpapers or hangings, but they benefit from large surface areas and high stability. For focal scratching of walls, critically assess the location.

Scratching is a dual-function means of communication. Claws visibly mark the substrate while glands located in the pads of the feet deposit chemical messages via pheromones, which accumulate with ongoing use of a surface. In multicat households, screen for signs of conflict in the vicinity or resources that may be contested. Scratching suspected to be secondary to conflict should be addressed holistically, taking into account environmental enrichment and training opportunities beyond the scope of this article. Place sturdy substrates in front of targeted areas to serve as a barrier, making the target an inefficient option compared with the new alternative. Wall-mounted options are an excellent way to conserve space while meeting needs. In addition to standard commercially available options, properly anchored sisal matting can provide scratching and climbing opportunities. Carpet can be applied to items such as bookshelves, provided they are stabilized to prevent movement. In cases where the wall itself does have a preferred texture, provide a scratching buffet to find a competitor that can outcompete the target and reinforce use.

Doors serve as obvious boundaries of territory, making their social importance clear. Reinforcement of boundaries provides general comfort but becomes even more vital in cases of conflict, inside or outside of the household. The presence of stray or wild animals may aggravate territorial stress, particularly if they are active in close proximity or are leaving their own chemical messages. As with scratching of walls, the location of the door may be more important than the specific orientation or texture of the targeted areas. A variety of scratching options should be provided any time destructive territorial scratching is suspected. This provides choice in a situation where lack of control over the environment may be a significant stressor. If space is limited in the immediate area, door-mounted scratchers can provide a suitable alternative. These should be used judiciously, as the majority of
commercially available products have significant stability concerns and without modification may serve as an unsteady aversive experience rather than an outlet for natural behavior. As with cats coping with conflict within the household, those suspected of territorial stress benefit from a well-rounded approach to address underlying concerns beyond simple scratching management.

Fabric outperforms many substrates in assessments of common scratching targets. Availability is common and shredding enables clear visual marking. The value of curtains goes beyond their basic material to serve additional valuable functions. To a kitten, curtains are especially attractive for the combined opportunities of “peek-a-boo” play and climbing that is not yet prohibited by weight. Providing zones of elevation takes advantage of available vertical space and caters to a cat’s natural preference for elevated positions.

Cats have a unique status as both predator and prey animals, with both aspects benefiting from the perspective that comes from high places. Alternatives must be tall enough to be considered a reasonable substitute, affording the same view as the initial target, and stable enough to prevent tipping. Very tall options may benefit from being directly secured to the wall or ceiling. During the early stages of implementation, pinning sturdy materials out of reach and storing delicate material will help to focus the behavior on the desired outlet.

As kittens practice desired behaviors and physically grow, stable trees become more appealing than unstable curtains. Enhance the value of the view by removing visual obstacles and increasing entertainment value through use of bird feeders or butterfly gardens. Window seats and strategic shelving can increase access without sacrificing floor space, but may not perform well when compared to multi-level trees. Opaque window coverings may be used to reduce the value of competing problematic areas, but should not be used in isolation. Blocking visual access alone, without providing alternatives, does not address the underlying motivation and may increase frustration. Solutions should focus on providing desirable alternatives in order to meet needs and set cats and their owners up for success.

Individual preference varies. Studies that scrutinize the popularity of different scratching targets give us valuable knowledge at a population level, but may not be representative of a given cat’s preferences. Assess placement, size, shape, texture, and function of targets to better guide choice of alternatives. By considering a cat’s pattern of behavior and communication of their needs, we can better address scratching concerns with solutions that are relevant to them. Similarly, provide owners with management options that better address their underlying concerns while following the principles of LIMA. By setting pets and their owners up for success with antecedent arrangement, we can protect the human-animal bond and make punishment irrelevant.

REFERENCES

Dr. Denise Johnson is a general practitioner of veterinary medicine with a special interest in behavior, particularly feline behavioral wellness. Her project, Committed to Claws, aims to reduce declawing by providing cat owners and pet professionals with humane scratching solutions that strengthen the human-animal bond. She also serves as a handling lab facilitator for the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, with qualifications including level three Fear Free Certification and Low Stress Handling Silver Certification.
PANDEMIC POULTRY PURCHASING

MAISIE WAKE

Poultry purchasing during the pandemic has brought attention to the need for animal behaviour consultants to have a basic level of understanding of chicken behaviour. Many new chicken owners would benefit from reputable behavioural expertise and resources during this time — we can help with this!

This year, as COVID-19 began to strike, some interesting elements of human behaviour began to unfold. One of these has been the perceived need to stockpile and/or look towards more self-sufficient lifestyles. With this has come a huge surge of back garden chicken-keeping.

While this can very often be born out of good intentions, the panic-driven roots of the behaviour could spell danger for the individual chickens who are suddenly a popular feature in any back garden.

Reasons for this panic buying are likely to be varied — the desire for easy access to regular eggs being the main one, of course.

The same concerns about pandemic pet purchasing of dogs and cats apply to chickens. People may now have plenty of time to spend with their new chickens in the garden, but as they head back to work, will the standard of care drop for their chickens? Another danger during this surge in chicken-keeping is new owners being completely unprepared with regards to the knowledge required.

In this article I’d like to highlight why chicken consultancy advice ought to be considered an important part of animal behaviour work. Chickens need to be embraced by animal behaviour consultants, now more than ever.

Chicken social systems are not always forgiving. As a child who had a hard time being bullied at school, it was a tough lesson to see that the same problems can and will happen within chicken society. I needed to learn how to carefully introduce new members, and how to keep the peace within an existing flock, ensuring adequate resources to go around, and making sure that all basic care was kept up to a high level, so that the chickens had a good foundation to thrive from.

Enrichment was not a word I had come across at this point, but I spent many a day creatively inventing new problems and puzzles for the chickens to solve. It was in these early days that I unknowingly learnt the fundamentals of classical and operant conditioning.

As chicks, I would call each in turn by name, to fly onto my outstretched arm. I would then either gently stroke them, or feed them healthy treats — those who liked this would stay, those who didn’t, would leave — it was clear to see how high-value a reinforcer choice was, because those who were allowed to leave would inevitably come back, usually each time with increased confidence.
Navigating the Misconceptions

In these early years I was exposed to the highs and lows of chicken keeping without a great deal of special guidance, aside from very supportive parents. Even though I had a good level of intuition when it came to animal care, there are practices that I learnt from old poultry books that, in hindsight, I would rather not have done. One example of this is flipping a chicken over onto their back, rendering them motionless for husbandry practices. I now know that this practice induces the catatonic state of tonic immobility. Valuable information such as this desperately needs to be made more available to the public as chickens become more popular. It still seems to be relatively common for people to think that it is okay to “hypnotise” a chicken in this way, in some cases simply doing this as a spectacle rather than for any specific purpose. Carrying chickens upside down by their legs will also render them motionless, with presumably the same physiological effect as being flipped upside-down onto their backs. There are of course more comfortable and species-sympathetic ways that a chicken can be carried, and this should be a fundamental part of chicken keeping guidance.

Championing Least Intrusive Minimally Aversive Principles

As behaviour consultants we can go a step further when helping with handling chickens, and begin to teach the basics of crate training. A common issue seen in backyard chicken flocks is the classic problem of catching the chicken in the first place. This helter-skelter chase around a garden or enclosure evokes the Benny Hill theme song… But I’m pretty sure the chicken being chased doesn’t have the same sense of fun! With cortisol levels running higher, this is not conducive to a positive handling session. Instead, by teaching crate training, this comedy chase can step aside for a more low-key and supportive prelude to handling.

There are numerous alternatives when catching chickens. For bantams and light breeds, birds can fly onto an outstretched arm, as I have described myself training my first chickens to do. An alternative for heavier breeds might be to be trained to hop onto a lap. One of my bantam Pekins, Puffin, has learnt to run into my open, outstretched hands instead. Bandit, pictured, doesn’t quite understand stimulus control yet, and flew onto my poised hands when I was holding my phone, ready to take a picture…

Chicken Introductions

Understanding chicken social structures is especially important in order to promote the very best psychological and physiological health. The chicken’s linear or triangular hierarchy has been well documented, and is often called the pecking order. It naturally consists of 5 to 30 birds. It appears that in larger groups of 120 birds or more, these hierarchy systems break down, and the birds instead rely on ‘status signalling’ rather than the remembered individual assessment of a small group pecking order, which starts from the individuals’ first meeting.¹

Why is this important for your average backyard chicken owner? It is likely that the numbers being kept are within the smaller numbers, where the individual assessment methods are carried out. With this in mind, introductions must be done very slowly and considerately – first impressions matter for chickens!

In a similar way to other species, careful shaping and habituation can be applied so that owners have the best chance of success at introducing new hens to individuals in their flock. The stability of the social structure depends upon the recognition of familiar birds, and their place in that particular hierarchy.²

Here you can see new hen Trixie (foreground) meeting one of the resident hens, Doris. Successfully integrating one new hen is often the hardest, and can lead to high stress levels and even mortality if not done incrementally.

The next step over a week later: Doris having some supervised time with Trixie, while Tawny and Bonnie Boy remain on the other side of the fence.

Over two weeks, she spend time with each member of the flock individually, before next going for shared excursions with the whole flock.

A successful integration after two weeks. New hen, Trixie, on the right.
Foraging is such an important part valuable to them. Forage for their food can be extremely opportunities for chickens to scratch and will help with this. Even just providing animal enrichment and its application behaviour opportunities and separate it is important that owners provide behaviours such as feather pecking, which is thought to be redirected foraging behaviour. In addition to manufactured feed, simple activities such as providing logs for insects to gather under, and then uncovering a select few of these, can be hugely enriching activities. Throughout these tasks, it is important that there are always ample resources available, enabling all parties to get involved in the activities, and resource guarding opportunities reduced. If there is a hen that is observably the lowest in the pecking order, it may help them if their owner can introduce some problem-solving activities in a safe space, away from the other hens. This will help to prevent development of negative mental state as they miss out on normal day-to-day tasks.

Selena

Provision of appropriate space will help in the setting up of a behaviourally healthy flock. The RSPCA’s rough guideline is a minimum space of 12 square metres for 30 birds, dependent on the size of the chickens and the layout of facilities. Spatial allowance has a profound effect on the ability of a chicken to perform comfort behaviours, such as wing-flapping, preening, and dust-bathing. Some of the more popular hen houses and attached runs are based on minimum space requirements. If reduced comfort behaviours or increased agonistic behaviours or stereotypies are seen in these systems, it is likely that more enrichment needs to be included, or extra space should be provided.

Tree or shrub cover is also essential for behavioural wellbeing — on signal of an alarm call from the cockerel or from a sentinel, the hens will all run for cover. Large fields for free-range chickens are not complete without adequate natural shelter so that the hens can run from a perceived threat. If this is not provided, they will instead choose to spend increased time in or near the house in order to feel safe.

Addressing Physical Health

Some knowledge of chicken health is essential in order to know when to refer back to a relevant specialist. Ex-battery chickens are becoming increasingly popular to rehome, which is fantastic for the chicken industry on the whole, and as far as increasing the reach of knowledge about chickens. These highly selected strains of chickens do come with their own physical and psychological needs however. They seemingly have a compromised immune function, with the most productive strains showing the greatest decline in humoral immune capacity.

It is important that new chicken owners are made aware of some of the more common of these problems. Calcium deficiency can lead to problems such as osteoporosis. Reproductive disorders, such as egg binding and egg yolk peritonitis, can also be more prevalent in ex-battery chickens. These may initially present as the chicken looking slower and more listless in their behaviour, along with some other signs beyond the scope of this article. It is only through further questions that you can help to determine the cause of the problem, referring back to a veterinary professional if necessary.

Egg eating, which is sometimes linked to calcium deficiencies, is a particularly difficult behaviour for many owners to work with. Overcrowding in the hen house can lead to a chicken laying her egg in an unsuitable place, such as on the floor. This leads to another individual inadvertently breaking the egg, only to then discover the tasty contents! This may be due to inadequate nesting space, inadequate floor space, or even more obscure reasons such as parasites or a lack of clean water.

Some people have success using “dummy eggs,” which limit the chance of success at the behaviour. This becomes a variable schedule of reinforcement, however, so there is always the chance that the hens will continue to test the durability of the eggs. Other more effective ways for owners to work with this are as follows: allow ample nesting boxes; dim the
lighting in the hen house; ensure that the house is adequately arranged with correct bedding, perching, and plenty of space; and importantly, collect eggs more frequently.

Because chickens can be prone to respiratory disorders, it is important that owners keep the environment clean. Chickens pass a large proportion of their faeces overnight, which means a daily cleanup of these droppings in the morning is an easy way for chicken owners to keep on top of hygiene. With an increased ability to smell the chemical ammonia, by the time we can smell it, it may already be causing the chickens some level of stress.

We know that physical and psychological health are often inextricably linked. In chickens, this sometimes seems even more the case. They are prone to a number of respiratory, digestive, and reproductive pathologies, and yet are often reported to have been “fine until it was too late.” As with many prey species, the instinct to disguise any physical issues is very strong in the chicken. They are certainly stoic little birds, and with good reason! Survival of the fittest is very apparent in the chicken's world.

**CHICKENS IN “LOCKDOWN”**

When dealing with an unwell chicken, it is important to work out whether they need to be immediately isolated or not. While isolation is essential if dealing with a contagious disease, for some disorders the owners may be able to work out a compromise that works with the social needs of chickens. It may be that the chicken in question can simply be on the other side of a fence, and be able to see and hear their flock mates. Some chickens will recover better if kept isolated, because this lifts the social pressures born from the chicken hierarchy. Others will appear to wither away as soon as they are separated from the group, and therefore a different approach should be taken. Some behaviours, such as foraging are linked to behavioural synchrony — as such, it may well help to encourage an unwell chicken to eat, if she is with her friends, or can at least see them — she can then join in with the activity of eating.

**BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF HEALTH ISSUES**

There are some health issues that have clear behavioural signs attached to them. For example, chickens sometimes suddenly resort to roosting elsewhere at night. Chickens have a fairly defined home range, and as a social and diurnal species, should want to seek the safety of their familiar coop and companions at night. If they choose another place to rest, it’s possible the coop doesn’t meet their physical needs, so it is worthwhile checking whether there is enough space, nesting boxes, and adequate perches, etc. They may roost elsewhere due to a lack of ventilation, bullying within the flock, a mite infestation, or rats, to name a few reasons.

On several occasions I have addressed this issue. In many of these cases the problem was due to a red mite infestation, which is a very common parasite in a backyard chicken population. Often the entire flock begins to adjust their usual roosting behaviour in these cases. If the behaviour is being displayed by an individual only (see picture opposite), this could instead be indicative of an issue within the social dynamics of the flock. Ample resources should be provided to prevent this, especially nesting boxes and perching opportunities within the hen house.

**BROODY BEHAVIOUR**

Lastly, another common issue that pet chicken owners may find challenging is broodiness. There appears to be confusion over the best way to deal with unwanted broodiness, and I’m afraid I cannot clear this up completely. Research seems sparse in this area, and currently the way many are advised to work with a backyard broody chicken is to put her in a broody “cage,” with the idea being to provide enough air flow to lower her body temperature down, which will have risen as part of the behavioural process of incubating eggs.

This method falls far short of the RSPCA’s five freedoms, clearly putting the broody hen into a state of discomfort and distress. I personally have struggled to find reasonable practices outlined elsewhere, and believe this to be an area where more research needs to be done.

My preferred way to work with broody hens is to allow them to be broody, and simply try to eliminate stress. I will watch that they are leaving the nest site daily to get adequate food and water. If they are not doing this, that is the only time when I will step in and gently lift them off the nest daily. In some situations, owners will need to keep a close eye on their chicken as they come back out of their nesting period, because they will need to re-establish themselves within the flock.

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE FOR CHICKENS**

The increased popularity that chickens have received during this pandemic really ought to have some positive effects as well as some of the concerns I have highlighted. In order to point this increase in chicken-keeping in the right direction, now is the time for behaviour consultants to broaden their scope of knowledge to chickens. They are such fascinating and amazing animals that I promise any behaviour consultant, you will not regret working with them more!

I would also love new owners to be made more aware that it is even possible to go to a professional for help with their chickens — in certain situations, even veterinary care is not always thought to be socially applicable to chickens, and behavioural health is sadly likely to be a step behind this. We need more than ever to push forward in advancing these standards for chickens. They deserve the utmost care and consideration from all of us!

**REFERENCES**

Environmental enrichment (EE) is a technique designed to enhance the quality of life of captive and domestic animals, by providing environmental stimuli to promote psychological and physiological well-being. Environmental enrichment (EE) is used extensively to support the welfare of domestic dogs. Examples include providing food-based EE activities to military housed dogs and providing auditory stimulation to kenneled dogs in rehoming centres. Through EE, dogs are provided with choices, environmental changes, and cognitive challenges.

For example, zoos provide puzzle feeders to primate species, sensory enrichment is provided to animals that hunt, and large balls are provided to elephants to promote play. Similarly, farm animals such as dairy cows and hens have shown positive interactions with EE. Dairy cows demonstrated more calming behaviours in the presence of mirrors, and providing items such as old CDs, balls, and empty boxes reduced fearfulness in laying hens.

While enrichment benefits both animals and those working with the animals, achieving the benefits can be highly dependent on sufficient resources. However, environmental enrichment (EE) can also provide benefits to species such as farm animals, companion animals, and zoo animals. This has resulted in numerous reported benefits such as a reduction in stress behaviours, a decrease in stereotypic and abnormal behaviours, improved cognition, and reduced barking. An increase in relaxation behaviours (e.g., resting, lying down, sleeping) and a reduction in
behaviors indicating alertness (e.g., sitting upright, looking around, ears pricked up) and stress (e.g., barking, excess panting, lip smacking) have been previously associated with improved welfare in kennel based EE studies.11

However, the impacts of enrichment appear dependent upon the type of activity, the dog's mental state, and previous experience. Despite the reported importance of EE for dog welfare, there is currently limited scientific evidence on the impact of individual types of EE items for dogs that are not permanently kenneled.

To support the development of best practice guidance for clinicians, practitioners, and pet dog owners, we recently evaluated the impact of different EE items on the behaviour of dogs in an office environment.

EVALUATING ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT IMPACTS IN THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT

This pilot study trialled seven EE activities that were either inanimate, animate, or a mixture of both. Animate enrichment involves another being (whether a human or conspecific companion) whilst inanimate enrichment involves no human or conspecific contact (e.g., feeding puzzles, soft toys, music, etc.).8 The term conspecific refers to an animal of the same species.

The activities evaluated were: tug play with a handler (animate), conspecific play with a known individual (animate), bonding session with a handler (animate), a large playhouse to explore (animate and inanimate), a bubble machine with bacon-scented bubbles (inanimate), an interactive food toy (inanimate), and a stuffed food toy (inanimate).

Ten dogs were housed in an office environment during the day whilst undertaking assistance dog training. In the evening and on weekends, dogs were boarded with volunteer families. Dogs received all seven EE activities twice on different days, with the EE activities provided in a randomised order. The behaviour of the dogs was video recorded and compared between pre- and post-enrichment activities.

A list of behaviours to record was developed from a combination of previous observations of dogs in the same environment and related behaviours reported within the literature. Behaviours observed using continuous sampling were classified and then grouped as maintenance, play, locomotion, relaxation, alert, or stress behaviours, and the same observer was used for all observations. The behaviours included in the study were representative of natural behaviours and are widely used as proxy indicators of dog welfare.11

We monitored similar behaviours in the non-kennel environment and observed a similar effect, with each EE activity resulting in an increase in behaviours previously associated with positive welfare and a decrease in behaviours previously associated with negative welfare.

The greatest average increases in relaxation behaviours were seen following conspecific play and the bacon bubble machine activities. The lowest increases were observed following the interactive toy and stuffed food toy activities (Figure 1).

Similar findings were observed for alert behaviours, with conspecific play and the bacon bubble machine resulting in the greatest reduction in alert behaviours, and the smallest reductions again found for the food-related EE activities (interactive food toy and stuffed food toy, Figure 2).

All EE activities resulted in a reduction in behaviours measured within this study that have previously been associated with signs of stress in dogs (including circling, pacing, excess panting, lip smacking, repeated yawning, tail between the legs, whining, and barking).

The largest reduction was produced by use of the playhouse and tug play activities and the smallest for the stuffed food toy (Figure 3).
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

This study demonstrated distinct differences in the effects on behaviour between the EE activities investigated. These results suggest that different EE activities can impact a dog’s welfare in varying ways. It is therefore important to encourage diversification of thinking in relation to EE provision for dogs, shifting common thinking of EE as one entity instead consider EE in different categories.

Within the literature, the most common types of enrichment used with dogs can often be categorised as either animate or inanimate.9 Conspecific play (animate) and the playhouse (mixture of inanimate and animate) activities involved the greatest levels of physical activity, play, and social contact, which are known to be particularly important for dogs and are associated with improved welfare.10-14

While the food-based EE activities resulted in the least change across all behaviours measured, these activities have been associated with relaxation behaviours. Filled food items have been previously shown to be relaxing and enjoyable for dogs15 and are often utilised to encourage calming and relaxation behaviours when a dog is having down time or is required to settle. However, food-based EE activities are frequently provided for dogs as they are quick and easy to use, which could lead to an overreliance.

Our finding of the stuffed food toy resulting in the least change across all behaviour categories is similar to findings in military housed dogs.16 Thus, it is suggested, when considering a programme of EE activities, food-based EE activities be used in moderation and in addition to other novel and physical EE activities.

One potential reason for the lack of change in behaviours following the stuffed food toy could be that this activity was very familiar to the dogs. The current study did not examine the potential for habituation. However, literature has shown that introducing novel activities and rotation of enrichment reduces the decline in interest that can occur as a result of repeated exposure.2,5,17,18 Indeed, the bacon bubble machine and the playhouse resulted in the greatest behaviour changes in our trial, and both activities were novel to the dogs.

Ultimately, the activities selected should be appropriate for the function and environment the dog is in. We suggest that the number and type of EE activities (animate or inanimate) should be rotated in order to achieve the maximum welfare benefits and to reduce any potential habituation. Future scientific research is needed to quantify the impact of habituation of individual activities in order to better support EE programme development by practitioners. EE should also be undertaken in a variety of locations (appropriate for the type of EE activity) as the change of environment adds further variation to the EE activity.

It is also important to select EE that is dog-safe and of interest to the individual. If the EE is not presented appropriately or the dog is not interested in the activity, the benefits may be limited.17 This presents a need for research examining the best methods of tailoring EE to the needs and interests of the individual such as through “choice tests.”

EE BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Results suggest that the welfare of dogs can be positively impacted by utilising a range of EE activities. EE should be considered essential for maintaining high standards of welfare and to support the physical and emotional needs of dogs.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that play and novel EE be provided to dogs as part of every EE programme. However, these activities have the potential to lead to heightened excitement in some dogs, and therefore may not be appropriate if a dog is required to settle shortly following the EE. Findings from this trial could be relevant for dogs housed in a kennel environment, for working and assistance dogs, and for use by pet dog owners.

To promote best EE practice, we would suggest that:

- A range of EE items are provided to dogs (both animate and inanimate).
- EE activities are changed and rotated to achieve maximum benefits.
- EE involving play and introduction of novel items should be part of regular EE activities.
- Stuffed food toys can be considered to assist with settling and relaxation activities.

REFERENCES

Becky Hunt has worked at one of the largest guide dog organisations in the world for the past three years specialising in dog behaviour research. Becky’s work provides scientifically valid evidence to support dog welfare and best practice in operations.

Helen Whiteside, Oxon MA, PhD has spent over a decade working in the third sector carrying out research to support dog welfare and championing an evidence-based approach. Helen currently heads the research department at one of the largest guide dog organisations in the world providing expertise in dog behaviour and research.

My insights into the hunting dog’s world begin with my own experiences of Cypriot hunting dogs, and an engagement with data that exists in my home and workplace in Cyprus. It makes its presence known to me continually and is not to be ignored. Indeed, the beliefs and values I have about hunting and the dogs involved are influenced by these dogs’ stories, which are woven into my professional self and personal scenarios.

Arguments about the difference between hunting and pet dogs are used to justify the legal and moral standing of the dogs, and where and how they fit into the Cypriot life. The demarcation of hunting dogs is vague. They exist in a liminal space, being neither companion, working, or farm dogs, with the closest definition I can conclude being an accessory to a leisure pursuit. Yet they exist in an anthropocentric world where some are revered, and some abused.

Dogs have been modified by humans to fill their many roles, either aesthetic or utilitarian, yet the role that appears to have the most longevity is that of a hunting partner, with Downs (1960) suggesting that wolves were domesticated for a symbiotic hunting role, although this has since been disputed. The use of dogs by subsistence hunters has been recorded in a wide variety of locations and habitats dating back to Palaeolithic times. Literature tells us that humans benefit significantly from their relationships with dogs. It seems that dogs can be adapted for human companionship either through their own choice — when they choose to accompany humans, for food or company, for example — or through genetic manipulation and training by humans to make them as we would wish.

It is known that humans’ hunting ability is more successful when assisted by dogs than by humans alone. In his ethnographic book about the hunter-gatherers of the Andaman Islands, Cipriani describes how the Onges acquired dogs for hunting purposes in the mid-1800s in order to capture pigs. Before this, the group survived on a predominantly fish-based diet, and the introduction of dogs revolutionised their lives. Cipriani claimed that the Onges’ affection towards dogs was unbalanced as a result and that the dogs became a pest, outnumbering the humans and sharing their fleas, yet this did not diminish their love of the dogs.11

Similar relationships have been noted in other areas of the world. In Indonesia, the Matinen people hunt wild pig and buffalo, accompanied by dogs. “In the hunt, locally bred dogs play an important part. During the hunts, but also at home in Makatan hunting dogs are affectionately cared for by their male masters.”12

The Swedish explorer Carl Lumholtz spent four years with Aboriginal communities in Queensland where he discovered an affectionate relationship between the humans and dingoes that were used for hunting purposes. He said:

The dingo is an important member of the family; it sleeps in the huts and gets plenty to eat, not only of meat but also of fruit. Its master never strikes, but merely threatens it. He caresses it like a child, eats the flesh off it, and then kisses it on the snout.1

It is interesting to note that Lumholtz describes the dogs used in areas where dingoes were scarcer, as dogs that “are of different breeds, for the dingoes of the natives quickly mix with the shepherd-dogs, greyhounds and terriers of the colonialists.” I am reminded of a similar mixture of greyhound and shepherd dog that I see here in Cyprus, where dogs are locally bred for similar purposes.

MODERN HUNTER-DOG RELATIONSHIPS

Members of the hunting community across Cyprus — where hunting is a leisure pursuit, not a necessity for subsistence — vary in their connectedness with their dogs. For some, the bond appears to be strong, with the relationship being of paramount importance for both human and canine, and ultimately resulting in a good working partnership in the hunting field and an appreciation of “personhood” of their dogs. Five hunters who I have spoken with tell me they keep their dogs inside their homes or in kennels attached to or on their property and share in their daily lives. However, having seen many more just in my own locality that are kept away from residential areas and in cages, I presume that the majority do not have such a close attachment. It is these caged conditions that spark controversy amongst non-hunting groups and animal advocates, who deem them to be poor in terms of welfare.

James Jordan described similar dichotomies with hunting dog value and treatment in the rural South of America. He notes the appreciation of the dog within that society, yet identifies what he calls a serious objection that arises out of the callous and cruel treatment of the dogs, and rightly states that “this apparent schizophrenia of the rural white Southerner in his relations with his dog is not without parallel elsewhere.” He debates the ability of humans to turn their canine companions from subjects that are handled humanely to objects where no care is given. He provides three possible reasons, all of which I can agree to a certain extent with from my observations of hunter-dog relationships here in Cyprus. Firstly, economic constraints and financial hardship may elicit the indifference to their dogs’ welfare. Secondly, he proposes that a masculine ethos of toughness that enables people to endure such hardship may be applied equally to the dogs. By doing so, the masculinity could be an unconscious defence against loss of the dog through straying, disease, or accident. Finally, he claims that the dog having a subordinate status becomes an outlet for the men’s dominance, power or displaced anger in communities where men tend to feel displaced and powerless themselves.15

David Blouin offers an insight into an ambiguous relationship that humans have with their pets, stating that:

Pet owners typically exhibit one of three orientations toward pets: “dominonistic,” “humanistic,” or “protectionistic.” The dominonistic have relatively low regard for their pets, valuing them primarily for the uses they provide, such as protection. Those employing the humanistic orientation elevate their pets to the status of surrogate humans and value their pets primarily for the affective benefits they enjoy from their close attachments. The protectionistic have high regard for both pets and animals more generally. They view pets as valuable companions and as creatures with their own interests.10

These three typologies help us to understand the contradictions and complexities of our interactions with dogs, often according to which cultural message they have been exposed.

WELFARE CONCERNS

Three days a week I work in a local veterinary clinic as a nurse. Hunting days often bring business from hunters whose dogs have been bitten by snakes, poisoned allegedly by rival hunters or, on occasion, accidentally shot. Outside of the season, pregnant bitches are brought in with the new generations of hunting dogs are frequently brought in, sick or having difficulties giving birth. The dogs are transported to the clinic in metal cages built into the bed of the pick-up trucks, or metal boxes, welded onto the tow bars of 4×4 vehicles. Dogs are carried in at arm’s length by the scruff of their necks and the loose skin on their backs as they are not leash trained and are usually dirty and smelly. Most are covered in ticks, many are in poor condition: underweight, lacking muscles and having overgrown nails, as they are kept caged except for when used for hunting.

What strikes me about these dogs is their lack of interaction with me. They are vacant, avoid eye contact and show no behavioural clues of connection like a fleeting look, lip lick, or tail wag.17,18 They avoid touch and affection, however kindly it is intended, and I am intrigued by the apparent learned helplessness demonstrated by their behaviour.19 An observer might argue that the behaviour is a result of lack of socialisation or fear of being at the clinic, and these are possible; however, I have seen other under-socialised dogs during many years of veterinary work that presented with a variety of behavioural issues, but none consistently demonstrated learned helplessness like the hunting dogs brought to this clinic. I consider that it could be a breed trait influence, but am more convinced that it is an experiential process that produces this behaviour as its
functional purpose fits with learned rather than innate reasons.

**POSSIBLE CAUSES OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN HUNTING DOGS**

Hunting dogs are not pets in the way many describe. They are also not free ranging, as they are restricted by human activities; they are mostly not under direct human supervision, but total human control. For hunting dogs, the practice of caging means that the dogs are not able to behave in ways which free-ranging dogs would—travelling, scavenging for food, often alone or in pairs, and so on — but they are also not given the opportunities for enrichment and attachment that pet dogs typically are (although of course, the way owners treat their pet dogs should also be subject to scrutiny, especially in terms of how much we restrict their opportunities for choice and how human behavioural norms around keeping pet dogs causes behaviour problems like separation anxiety).

Cypriot hunting dogs do not typically share a bond with their human owner in the same way that companion dogs might. They live in cages, and there is no freedom, no companionship, no playtime, no exercise, no socialization. They are not able to express themselves physically, and are often stressed by their environment. This stress may manifest as repetitive behaviours such as pacing, wall barking, excessive licking, continual barking — stress behaviours that have been documented for decades.

Yet, for many hunting dogs, boredom appears to manifest itself in a lethargy or even apathy, particularly in the Beagle and hound-type dogs, something identified by Corson and Corson (1976) who noted Beagles' stress responses were absent or described as a withdrawal response compared to terrier-type breeds, that showed a more usual flight or fight response. I question whether hunting dog breeds hide their stress responses so that to the observer they appear to be content with their environments when in fact they are not. This is not necessarily a correlation to breed, more a response to the environment in which hunting dogs live.

**HOW CAGING IS STRESSFUL FOR HUNTING DOGS**

Free-ranging dogs have physical space, which allows time for solitude, but the forced closeness of caged dogs can contribute to territorial behaviours rarely seen in free-ranging groups, as well as other issues like sleep deprivation. The inability for hunting dogs to behave normally due to their housing, I suspect, is one of the main contributors to stress indicators that I have observed. Beeda et al. (1997) state: “Poor housing conditions, harsh training sessions and uncontrollable or unpredictable social environments are examples of situations that may lead to reduced welfare status in dogs. Individuals that suffer from poor welfare presumably experience stress and may consequently exhibit stress responses.”

I have seen dogs displaying repetitive behaviours such as pacing, wall bouncing, excessive licking, continual barking — stress behaviours that have been documented for decades.

The long periods of confinement in cages, lack of stimulation and socialisation, combined with poor husbandry, seemed to have the most detrimental impact on the dogs. The dog's basic needs were not met mentally, emotionally and sometimes physically, and they suffered as a consequence. However, many much-loved companion dogs are left confined in training crates within the home for long periods, while their guardians are out. Pierce and Bekoff (2019) explain how this type of captivity can be detrimental to millions of dogs suffering from boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and frustration. These feelings can manifest into behavioural problems such as excessive barking, destructiveness, or overeating.

Other contributing factors to overall poor welfare are more evident. Irregular food, lack of fresh water, minimal mental and physical stimulation, and lack of preventative medical care are, to passing visitors, grounds enough for complaint, yet the fundamental ethological needs are often missed even if the dogs do have food, water and shelter. Indeed, I suspect the happiest times for those dogs are when they are hunting and free to experience normal behaviours, can express themselves physically, and are stimulated mentally.

**HUNTING DOGS AND RESCUE DOGS**

When considering the plight of many hunting dogs in the broader picture of animal suffering in Cyprus, the ethical theories which enable focusing on a particular feature, in this case hunting dogs, can in effect flatten or obscure the more significant, complex moral problems that exist. When considering the ethical concerns of hunting dogs, I agree with Gruen that more should be done to focus on their norms, as a species and as individuals. Paying attention to hunting dogs’ needs, and indeed their individual difference rather than trying to apply a label, is necessary to enable them to flourish and live more comfortably in their worlds with their humans.

I have discovered that the “hunting dog” is often misunderstood in terms of behaviour, needs, and how they experience their lives. I have found that they are not alone in this, as companion dogs too can suffer similar misunderstandings. The view that dogs can only be happy inside a house, with a human family to take care of them, seems to be the most popularly held one by those who contest the hunters and their dog-related practices. Hunting dogs, like many other species, are dominated by humans who control and dictate how their lives will be lived, regardless of whether those people are hunters or “rescuers.” The rescuing of hunting dogs is a small-scale industry in its own right, with competition for the neediest cases in Cyprus because of the financial benefits to the rescue organization; leading to approaches that did not always benefit the dogs. This is another form of exploitation.

Canines are a species that can form communities, find niches for themselves, and live a life more appropriate with their own, within varying degrees of proximity to humans. They are not lost souls waiting for human saviours. They exhibit agency and free will.
Throughout my time spent with these dogs, I encountered and bore witness to the dogs’ presences, experiencing a deep intersubjectivity and honouring them, both in life and death. I explored my role as an advocate for them and I invite others to do the same. I hope by raising awareness of and the profound impacts enrolment into hunting has, the needs of the dogs in this context will be better met.

REFERENCES


Teresa Tyler is an Anthrozoologist, a professional canine behaviourists and writer. She is a former veterinary nurse and lecturer of canine behaviour. She is a member of the Pet Professional International, Global Association of Animal Behavioural Consultants and the International Companion Animal Network. She is a graduate of the University of Exeter at Masters Level and is completing a PhD in Anthrozoology. Through her organisation TheDoGenius (www.thedogenius.com), she provides education for all dog professionals and dog guardians that teach the latest science-based, dog-centric knowledge, skills and advocacy. She currently resides in rural Cyprus with her nine beautiful rescue dogs, who are her motivation and inspiration.
The concept of socially conscious sheltering (SCS) as an approach to sheltering was developed in Colorado by shelter leaders Apryl Steele, DVM, Jan McHugh-Smith, Lisa Pederson, and Judy Calhoun. Three of these shelter leaders co-authored an article, “Crisis in Animal Welfare,” published in the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association newsletter The Voice in 2018.1 Steele, McHugh-Smith, and Pederson outlined the tenets of SCS in that publication, which we will explore further in this article and in subsequent writings as part of a three-article series on socially conscious sheltering.

In this first article of the series, we will provide an overview on socially conscious sheltering. In the second, we will explore how to move from concept to operations, and in the last installment we will explore some case studies of shelters who have implemented SCS in part or in whole.

According to Marissa Martino, former behavior manager at Dumb Friends League (DFL) in Denver, “The original goal behind this concept was to bring a common language and aspirational focus for animal welfare organizations to achieve.”2 Marissa is currently a community liaison at DFL who provides technical support to shelters across Colorado and was close to the center of the socially conscious sheltering concept when it emerged.

Marissa also noted that our industry has experienced a great deal of change in the past few years, and these leaders wanted to celebrate and focus on the positive ways in which animal shelters have become members of their communities. They wanted to highlight how not only are we a community in our own right working together to improve the lives of animals, but we can also partner with the veterinary community, human service agencies, pet stores, animal trainers, behavior professionals, and other industries in order to move toward a model of sheltering that is cooperative. Gone are the days in which animal shelters hid their operations and decision-making processes. SCS aims to bring the industry forward and concentrate on how we can work together and celebrate our collective strength.

In the few years since the socially conscious sheltering model was first conceptualized in 2018, it has been adopted by a number of animal welfare organizations across the United States. When we compare SCS to the no kill movement, the Asilomar Accords, and the Five Freedoms, we find some similar themes, as well as some stark contrasts. What is absent, however, are statistics that have created some adverse effects over the years.

Over-reliance on one statistic in particular, live release rate (LRR), to measure success of animal welfare organizations has too often led to warehousing animals in less than desirable conditions as well as the placement of animals who pose a risk to public safety. This has been done in order to achieve a live release rate of 90% or greater that aligns with the core interpretation of the definition of “no-kill.” While we all aspire to achieve as high of a live release rate as possible, reality has led many of us to come to the conclusion that there is no way to find adequate shelter for every animal or safe placement for very ill or behaviorally dangerous animals.

Those shelters striving to incorporate SCS into their mission and operations may have different approaches, depending upon the population of animals in their care and the community they serve. Despite those differences, we find many similarities across shelters who adopt the socially conscious sheltering model. The model allows for different implementations of the basic tenets, which we will explore herein.

**The first tenant of SCS is ensuring every unwanted or homeless animal has a safe place to go for shelter and food.**

This means that in every community, every pet in need should have a shelter that will be there in a crisis, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Stray animals are found at all times, day and night, and a socially conscious community will find a way to address that reality.

To implement this tenet, limited-admission, open-admission, and local rescues and organizations will need to work together to make this a reality. This does not mean that all rescues and shelters need to open their doors to any...
pet at any time, but it does mean that they will partner with the other shelters or services in their area to achieve this goal.

For example, one shelter in a community may be open to strays and another is not, but the limited-admission shelter has partnered with a domestic violence shelter, ensuring that people fleeing from dangerous living situations have a safe harbor for their pets. The limited-admission shelter works with the domestic violence shelter to set up temporary housing for the animals until they are transferred to the open admissions shelter. Once in this shelter's care, those喂养的 animals will be held and cared for by shelter staff until such time that the victim of domestic violence and their pets have safe residence. Both shelters are meeting the needs of their community and providing different services. Together they have made strides toward creating a socially conscious community.

SCS also places an emphasis on placing every healthy animal. This means not making euthanasia decisions based solely on time and space. On the other hand, it also means that animals adopted have not displayed behavior that is likely to cause significant harm or death to any person or other animal. Far too often, we have seen animals who are not safe with people, other dogs, or other animals placed in homes, with severe and undesired consequences. Socially conscious communities and shelters consider the impact of each placement and ensure that it will add a benefit to the adopter's life and not place any community member, human or other animal, at risk of emotional or physical harm.

SCS also addresses the need to assess the medical and behavioral needs of homeless pets and ensure these needs are thoughtfully addressed. In order to achieve this goal, shelters will ensure each animal in their care receives timely and appropriate veterinary and behavioral care. This tenant of socially conscious sheltering, which focuses on behavioral health, is a key difference between the no-kill movement and SCS. No Kill prioritizes that animal, both historically and through individual assessment. Important and related concepts to making appropriate euthanasia decisions include communicating directly, intentionally, and transparently with the community that the shelter serves to both identify what behavior and medical challenges adopters are willing to assume, and to provide transparent information about euthanasia decisions. One of the goals of euthanasia decisions is to make decisions similar to that of pet owners who seek to alleviate emotional or physical suffering.

As a result of adopting SCS, a shelter will provide adequate daily enrichment, consider the mental well-being of the animals in their care, and ensure each individual animal's behavioral health is addressed by staff that has some basic knowledge of behavioral care. This translates to a facility that provides individualized behavioral care to all animals, addressing not only species-specific needs, such as perches for cats, but individuals' needs, such hiding spaces for fearful animals. Exercise, play, toys, and other types of enrichment are also provided on a daily basis.

When an animal's individual behavioral welfare needs exceed that of a typical animal, an SCS organization will seek out the guidance of a qualified and certified behavior professional for guidance and support, for example an individual who has obtained IAABC's shelter certification, a CDTC, CPDT–KA, KPA–CTP, or CTC. The end goal is to minimize mental suffering by ensuring that animals do not become shut down, show extreme signs of fear or anxiety, or behaviorally deteriorate while in the shelter's care.

If all resources are exhausted, yet the animal continues to demonstrate behaviors that indicate poor behavioral health, euthanasia should be considered. It is also an imperative to ensure that dangerous animals, or potentially dangerous animals, are not placed into our communities.

Shelters adopting SCS will also strive to prevent unnecessary suffering and make appropriate and timely euthanasia decisions based on all of the available information regarding that animal, both historically and through individual assessment. Important and related concepts to making appropriate euthanasia decisions include communicating directly, intentionally, and transparently with the community that the shelter serves to both identify what behavior and medical challenges adopters are willing to assume, and to provide transparent information about euthanasia decisions. One of the goals of euthanasia decisions is to make decisions similar to that of pet owners who seek to alleviate emotional or physical suffering.

Traditional shelters are often focused on driving animal adoptions. In addition to this traditional approach, shelters adopting the SCS framework attempt to enhance the human-animal bond through safe, thoughtful placement of animals. This means that through the adoption, promotion, and animal assessment process, every attempt is made to understand the lifestyle of the adopter and the needs and traits of the pet to make the best match possible.

This is not to dismiss the concept of open adoptions, however. When adopting out behaviorally healthy cats and dogs, the open adoption concept can still hold true. However, if adopting out animals who need more behavioral or medical support, for example a fearful dog, more careful adoption counseling, clear and honest expectation setting, and post-adoption support will be necessary. This does not mean stricter adoption criteria, but enhancing the human-animal bond does mean supporting new owners and pets after adoption through follow-ups or low- or no-cost training support, as well as in-depth disclosure of behavior. It is important to emphasize here that under no circumstances should a new adopter be coerced to keep a pet that does not fit their lifestyle, is ill, or poses a risk to their physical or mental well-being.

One challenge that we see for shelters today is how to ethically transfer animals into and from other communities. We can find a balance between supporting both communities' needs for medically and behaviorally healthy animals. This can occur as a result of improved communication and reducing, managing, and disclosing risks for animals and people. This is an important feature of socially conscious sheltering. Interstate transfer is now a common practice in the industry and a daily reality for many shelters in the U.S. In receiving areas where pet populations are lower, the tendency can result in the transfer of fearful, reactive, and under-socialized animals. A socially conscious model will ensure that behaviorally and medically sound animals are brought into a community and can be adopted. This can only be achieved through a focus on education and communication between the sending and receiving organizations.

Ultimately, shelters who adopt socially conscious sheltering will strive to foster a culture of transparency, ethical decision-making, mutual respect, continual learning, and collaboration. Since animal welfare is constantly evolving, it is integral that we maintain impeccable accountability and integrity. By understanding that we are all working toward the same goal and toward one
another’s success, we will create the best outcomes for all animals and those who care for them.

REFERENCES

READ THE REST OF THE SERIES
Socially Conscious Sheltering: Moving from Aspiration to Operation
fall2020.iaabcjournal.org/socially-conscious-sheltering-moving-from-aspiration-to-operation/

Socially Conscious Sheltering: Examples in Practice
winter2020.iaabcjournal.org/socially-conscious-sheltering-examples-in-practice/

Dot Baisly is a certified professional dog trainer (through CCPDT), a certified dog behavior counselor, certified cat behavior consultant and certified shelter behavior professional (through IAABC). She also holds a Master’s degree in Animal Behavior from Tufts University. She has been working in animal welfare and behavior for over 20 years, both in animal welfare and rescue organizations in New York and New England, and with private clients as a consultant for dogs and cats. Currently she works as the Director of Behavior for Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, MA. Dot also works with many shelters and rescue as a consultant, evaluating dogs and educating staff and volunteers on a wide variety of subjects.

When not working with shelter animals she also works with service dogs as a field representative for Paws With A Cause. She shares her home with her “demo” dog for Paws With A Cause, Angus and her pocket pitbull, Porkchop. Dot is dedicated to helping professionalize shelter animal behavior through her work with IAABC and other animal welfare and behavior organizations.

Mara Velez is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer who specializes in training fearful dogs; helping families with dogs recently adopted from a shelter; managing and training leash reactive dogs; and modifying fear-based aggression behaviors. Mara has spent more than a decade in sheltering at both open-admission and limited-admission facilities. She is now the Executive Director for the Shelter Playgroup Alliance (SPA), a shelter enrichment organization that helps shelters implement enrichment programs, including playgroups. Mara is also the Executive Director of Humane Dog Training Advocates (HDTA), an owner-education focused non-profit.

Mara holds both a bachelors and masters degree in psychology and completed all of the course work for a doctorate in education. Mara is also a learning and development consultant to corporations across a variety of industries, where she advises and works on projects related to leadership development, process improvement, and learning program management.

IN THE BEGINNING
Most equestrians have heard of clicker training, and many now practise it, but compared to traditional horsemanship it is still the new kid on the block.

In the 1940s Keller and Marion Breland (and later with Bob Bailey) trained many different animals using the laboratory-proven techniques of B. F. Skinner’s operant conditioning. In the ’80s Karen Pryor’s pivotal book, Don’t Shoot the Dog, drew on 20 years of training marine mammals and brought operant conditioning to a much wider audience, including dog trainers.

Alexandra Kurland’s book, Clicker Training for Your Horse, helped my mind finally make the leap from clicker training being something for dog trainers, to realizing there was no reason it couldn’t work in horses. All that time to draw the same conclusions that the Brelands and Bailey had previously shown — that operant conditioning works with all animals!

Since the early days of developing operant conditioning, there has been a constant evolution of techniques in the field of equine learning. Nothing has changed in the A-B-C (antecedent-behaviour-consequence) of learning – it is still for us to create an antecedent and consequence that will increase or maintain future behaviour. What has changed is our awareness of the need to improve at guiding horses towards an errorless learning path. Making the desired behaviour so easy to find that the horse has better chances to be right means less stress for everyone during teaching and learning.

As trainers, we strive to be better practitioners of clicker training while also...
communicating its benefits to a wider audience. We know that training in the real world outside of a science laboratory brings its own difficulties, and we are always developing creative solutions to the unique challenges our clients and their animals face.

TARGETING HAS EVOLVED

In the U.K. it is still quite hard to find horse trainers who understand the theory of operant conditioning and are experienced in its application to horses. I'm sure this may also be the case in the rest of the world. There is therefore a reliance on videos, books, and internet advice or, if you are very lucky, a visiting clinician making a once-in-a-while trip. It's hard enough to absorb the mechanical skills required to get started, but applying the art and science of shaping, chaining, adding cues, and so on can all seem like too much to take on without greater support.

There are some excellent paid (and some free) online educational resources out there, but often people feel drawn down the “give it a go” path, taking free support from the many who offer advice in Facebook groups.

This path can be hard to follow when you are just starting out. Nowadays I recoil at the advice to simply go get a target stick and get your horse touching it, then just click and give food when they do. I know that people mean well in trying to encourage others to move away from traditional techniques, but perhaps they haven't been on the “cleaning-up” end of advice like this!

At the start of my clicker journey, following the books I read and videos I watched, I used targeting to produce behaviour.

Pretty much every piece of advice I read and heard was to associate the clicker with food by using the behaviour of touching a target, at first in protected contact and then later, up close, in freedom.

So I took my tennis ball and pierced it with a garden cane. Soon I could do high, low, and side touches. My horse would follow me (with ears back or perhaps a little “fed up” face) while I held out the target. He would touch random objects and look at me endearingly (or so I thought) — sometimes it made me smile so much that I gave him food.

This seemed to be going well for a while, until I couldn't bear the resulting frustration I saw in the horses. It wasn't the target that was at fault, but my poor training of it. (Stimulus control? What stimulus control?) I now know that just about everything I did back then was wrong, and it caused my horses to build chains of unwanted behaviours before I even understood what a chain was.

I don't think I was alone. I saw videos of horses looking similarly lost or annoyed at a target held under their noses as they followed along. I realized that if I wanted to get better at clicker training, I had to rethink what I was doing.

IF THINGS CAN GO WRONG, THEY WILL!

I understand why the behaviour of targeting is so often used as a means to associate the clicker. And I have developed the skills to do this myself without causing stress to a horse. What is tricky is taking a new trainer and giving them the skills to handle a target, a clicker, and food.

Humans pick up a love of targeting with alacrity. I've seen new trainers patiently sit through a clinic's theory session, often not quite understanding the whole process — until the target is produced. It's clear to see how enjoyable those first sessions can be for the horse (and even more so for the human). Touch-click-feed, touch-click-feed...what's not to love? The instructor talks about shaping, the new trainer hears the rules but what they see is that touch-click-feed, touch-click-feed...they just want to give it a go.

They get home and try it with their own horse, and wow is that horse clever! Then they show the assembled members of the livery (barn) and they too marvel at the clever horse. And who can blame them — after all, I was the same way when I first learned about targets and clicker training. I remember standing around, target in hand, telling my friends about this new way of training.

But quite soon our horse, having tried to touch the "miracle food bringer" as a way to earn reinforcement, heads into frustration and extinction. With one extinction burst the horse may bite off our pocket (yes, I've helped a client with just that scenario!) and the excited new trainer might just put down their target forever. The horse could also just lose faith in a game where the rules are not clear or easy to understand, and give up on interaction.
WHY THINGS GO WRONG

Not only can a new equine learner develop a deep interest in touching all kinds of things that are not intended to be targets, they often don't get a clear association of the click with the food reinforcer. It all becomes quite muddled. Instead of seeing a growing association of the click with the reinforcer, we might see an association building between the target and the reinforcer.

That relatively simple idea of using a target to associate the clicker makes sense; a novel behaviour not found in the repertoire of most horses could work well. But if the novice trainer has poor timing and mechanics, the association with the clicker might end up overshadowed by the association with the target. Our conditioned reinforcer becomes insecure, it isn't what we thought we were associating, and extinction is a possible outcome.

As Dr. Susan Friedman always reminds us, the behaviour of an individual is a study of one. In the case of a human training a horse, we have to study the behaviour of both the individuals, plus the way they might impact each other. Targeting behaviours might be taught to fluency with ease by an experienced trainer. But for an inexperienced trainer and horse we need to be careful that we set them both up for success.

One of the great answers I heard in many of the Q and A sessions during the awesome Lemonade Conference was “it depends.” This from some of the greatest trainers, this highlights the difficulty of training a horse, and the need to be careful in our approach.

If a trainer is considering a loading protocol for a client who is not yet able etc., then using a target and food might be a good short-term option. The target will only appear at the foot of the ramp and the horse seeing loading as primarily the behaviour of following a rendering machine is less of a concern.

On the other end of the spectrum, if a client is adopting clicker training as their primary training then it could be sensible to save targeting until their knowledge is on a sounder footing.

HOW WE MIGHT INTRODUCE TARGETING TO A HORSE AND TRAINER

In the video Claire and Darcy show one way to begin to teach targeting. This will be a touch target cue rather than a follow target cue. This is another area for later confusion when the horse has not been taught the difference between touching and following the target.

When Darcy began targeting, Claire carefully presented the target in such a way that made it hard for him to fail. In human terms, he is inquisitive and brave; we don’t want clicker training to change his beliefs that humans are fun to interact with. Using errorless learning as a guide, the target is presented cleanly and clearly for him, early gains in reinforcement build his confidence. Antecedent set-up is vital: Claire holds the target away from her body and away from the food; she drops the target away when she doesn’t want him to touch it. Failure is unlikely.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

- To avoid extinction and its consequences, we should look at whether targeting is our best option in associating the clicker.
- When targeting is introduced, considered use of antecedent set-up and fading of environmental cues is essential to follow an errorless learning protocol.
- Targeting can be a fun game that can add enrichment to all horse’s lives; it is both stimulating and reinforcing as they hone their problem-solving skills.
- Touching novel objects on cue is a great way to indicate to your horse that something they meet in new
environments is safe: "Hey, Darcy, that rubbish bin is just another targeting opportunity to gain reinforcement" has to be one of the most reassuring games to play when out hacking on the trail.

- Targets (to various parts of the body: chin, ears, shoulder, knee, hoof, hip, etc.) are a great tool to produce behaviour. They can assist in clean luring of behaviours that we can go on to shape (and quickly fade the target).

- Duration of touch to a target can be helpful in husbandry and medical procedures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Trudi Dempsey is an IAABC certified horse behaviour consultant, ABTC accredited animal behaviourist and trainer based in the South West of England. She has been training humans and their horses for more than 25 years specialising in clicker training and bitless riding. Trudi travels within the UK hosting behaviour and training workshops.

With thanks to Claire and Darcy for their help with video demonstrations.

WRITE FOR US!

The IAABC Journal is always open for new submissions! We’re looking for English and Spanish content from people working with all species, from all walks of life. Contact Tiro, our Managing Editor at journal@iaabcfoundation.org for more information.
Read the most popular articles from the last year of The IAABC Journal, the award-winning, peer-reviewed quarterly online publication from The IAABC Foundation.