

First we know that stepping up is a learned behavior. What does that mean? Well, it means that a bird performs the behavior of step up either increasingly or decreasingly in the future based on the consequences that immediately and consistently follow the step up. With a bird that used to step up readily but now steps up decreasingly, we know that the perceived consequence for the bird has changed from being reinforcing to punishing. Well, this is definitely the case with a bird that goes through a period of time stepping up only to find out that the consequence is something aversive, i.e. medical treatment.

Now the bird bites to remove the potential aversive consequence. And voila, it works! Biting the hand removes the hand! In fact the biting behavior will maintain itself or increase. This is a negatively reinforced behavior, i.e. an increasing behavior that removes an aversive consequence. Hey this all makes sense!

How do we change this; how do we help the bird learn to step up again without biting? Well, we know that hands and fingers presented for a step-up are the cue, i.e. immediate antecedent, for step-up behavior and then the potential aversive consequence. In order to change the behavior from biting to stepping up, we need to help the bird learn that the cue means the following consequences are rewarding not aversive. But we have to take small steps, i.e. successive approximations, to help the bird learn gradually without the bird becoming uncomfortable and being forced to revert back to the biting behavior. We call this shaping a behavior with positive reinforcement. And we need a shaping plan to do this!

Let's put a simple one in place.

- 1) Present a finger/hand to the bird at a distance from the bird where the bird displays relaxed signs
- 2) Say "good" and give a treat! Note: Don't bait the bird by showing it the treat in advance of the behavior. This will create other problems in the future.
- 3) Now cycle steps 1 and 2 with each cycle moving the finger/hand closer to the bird. Let the bird's body language be your guide as to how much to move closer each time. Make sure the bird remains relaxed at all times. This may take some time, i.e. days, weeks.
- 4) Now you have finally gotten your finger next to the bird. Now target your bird to put a foot on your finger. Immediately say "Good" and treat! If the bird wants to step back, let him do it.
- 5) Next keep increasing the criteria for each shaping step closer to the bird finally placing both feet on your finger. Remember say "Good" and treat for each behavior.

Note: Ignore undesired behaviors. If he bites or displays aggressive signs at any point, remove your hand without any histrionics, and then time-out for a brief 20-30 seconds. This is an indication that the level of reinforcement at the current shaping step has not out matched the level of perceived punishment. Regress back in the steps, and always end on a positively reinforced behavior.

Well, this is an abbreviated shaping plan, but it gives you the idea. You have to learn to be creative to change the shaping plan as necessary to help the bird learn the behavior. Each bird is an individual with its own unique learning history. Again let the bird's body language be your guide.

Here are the important rules for shaping well performed behaviors

- 1) Provide immediate and consistent reinforcement for each behavior performed at the currently set criteria
- 2) Don't change the criteria mid-stream in the behavior
- 3) Quick repetitions of reinforced behavior at the current set criteria builds confidence and fluid behavior
- 4) Raise criteria in increments small enough that the subject always has a realistic chance for reinforcement
- 5) Train for one aspect of any particular behavior at a time, don't shape for two criteria at the same time
- 6) When introducing a new criteria or aspect of the behavioral skill temporarily relax the old ones
- 7) Stay ahead of your animal. Plan the shaping plan completely so that if the animal makes sudden progress, you are aware of what to reinforce next.
- 8) If one shaping procedure is not eliciting progress, find another way. Be creative for your individual.
- 9) Don't interrupt a training session
- 10) End each session on a high note with reinforcement
- 11) If behavior deteriorates at a certain step, regress back a few steps to help the animal review the shaping process