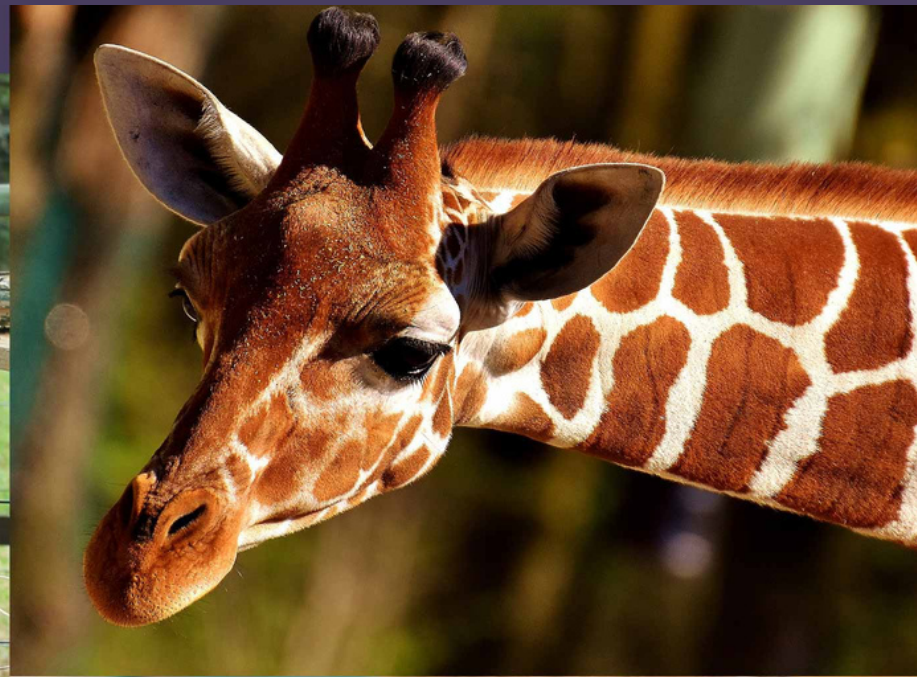


Getting Started

Helping Fearful, Reactive & Aggressive Animals



By Debbie Jacobs, CPDT-KA, RBT

Pairing

Safety, Rapport & Trust Building

We need the animal to see, hear or smell us (and the others in their lives) and have a happy, feel-good response. We may spend days or even weeks teaching the animal that every time we are on the scene with them the possibility that good things will happen is likely. To do this we give away whatever the animal wants or likes. A reasonable and easy thing to use is food, yummy, special, out of the ordinary, food. Play is also a great way to create rapport with an animal, but early on it may not be available to us because the animal is too scared to engage with us or toys and activities we provide.

Unless an animal is clearly and enthusiastically soliciting handling from you, refrain from trying to pet, touch, hold or restrain them. An animal may approach you for a sniff, or to take food, but not



want to be handled. Not touching animals may take effort and practice, and management creativity, but it's important, especially early on. It is our responsibility if our actions saddle an animal with a bite, scratch or kicking history that could have been avoided had we done a better job of respecting their fear of being approached, handled, hugged, petted or restrained.

This is the time to start to find out what kinds of things your animal prefers and enjoys. Make a note of which food they eat first or fastest. Experiment with a variety of foods. Try different textures,

consistencies and sizes. Do they prefer to lick or chew food items? You will be using their preferred foods, items and activities as rewards and reinforcement when you start training.

If an animal can engage with you, is willing to approach you without a food lure, or follows you, sits near you, etc., as opposed to trying to run and hide from you, or scooting away when you reach toward, then you can start to think about ways you can interact with the animal, using body language that is non-confrontational and less likely to scare or worry the animal. This will vary between species, but proximity is often more scary for an animal compared to maintaining distance. If you are not sure if an animal will behave aggressively toward you, use extreme caution in the way you position yourself in relation to them. Setting up a barrier to work through can also keep you safe, and help the animal learn they are safe on their side of it.

Feeling Good

Classical Conditioning

Choice is a popular buzzword in the animal training industry these days. It is a positive trend to see people allowing an animal to choose to do something, or not. An animal should always have the option to say no thank you and walk away.* Keep in mind that if this happens, the trainer or owner, along with patting themselves on the back for not forcing the animal into doing something, should take a step back and consider why the animal was not able to do what they wanted. Our goal is to have our animals stay engaged with us, and perform the behaviors we are training so we can reinforce them. When an animal chooses to walk away, it may be because they are uncomfortable and escaping from us and our

**Other than necessary life saving or welfare improving treatment.*



training, or they are looking for something better, more fun, to do. We should rethink how we are setting the animal up for those interactions with us. We don't want our animals to choose to walk away.

When something in the environment that an animal can perceive—they see it, hear it, feel it or smell it—causes a response in an animal, that response is called either a classical, Pavlovian or respondent one. I will use the term classical.

In classical conditioning (conditioning means learning) the response is something we can't necessarily see; e.g., the heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, adrenaline flows, saliva is released. The animal isn't deciding to respond in these ways; they just happen. We can assume there are emotional responses that accompany these changes. We call these emotional responses, conditioned emotional responses or CERs. When frightened our hearts race, our palms sweat and our mouths go dry. If we're not terrified but not 100% comfortable we might get that butterflies in our stomach feeling. When we look at a cute puppy there are releases of neurochemicals that accompany that event and may cause the warm fuzzies we experience. Since our animals are not hooked up to equipment that can identify and measure the internal processes, what we can see is how their behavior changes, through their body language. From this we infer whether the responses we can't see (e.g., the release of adrenaline,

changes in cortisol, blood pressure or heart rate) are creating an emotional response that is good, bad or neutral.

A hand, or any other object or event can cause a response. The response will be good, bad or neutral, based on what the animal has learned the thing predicts. A hand might mean that a treat is on its way, or a smack on the muzzle or rump. Or the animal might not be bothered either way if they have not had prior experiences with hands, or the experiences didn't matter one way or the other when they did.

Understanding how this type of conditioning or learning happens is important when working with fearful animals. The behaviors we observe—fleeing, cowering, ducking, hiding, growling, biting, kicking, freezing—are because something in the environment is predicting that something scary or threatening is likely to occur. This immediate CER is all the evidence the animal needs to continue to

behave as though something that may never have actually hurt them might do so, and they should prepare for it. Just because the lion didn't kill and eat you today doesn't mean it won't tomorrow. Better safe than sorry.....GET AWAY! MAKE IT GO AWAY! DON'T MOVE AND MAYBE IT WON'T HURT YOU!

We try to create good CERs to new objects or events, and change bad CERs to good ones. When we change a CER it is called classical counterconditioning. To do this we add something immediately following the scary thing that causes the animal to feel good, rather than bad.

Food is the most obvious choice. Animals do not need to be taught to feel good about food; food is an unconditioned stimulus (US). The scary thing is something the animal has learned to feel afraid of; it's a conditioned stimulus (CS). This is often also called a trigger.



After the animal has learned that the formerly scary thing is a reliable predictor of something good, it is possible to remove the food (US) and still get the good CER. So long as we proceed thoughtfully and don't have the CS scare the animal again, and continue to have it predict good things, we can create a change in the animal's emotional response that is long lasting.

Our long range goal is to help the animal learn that anything that might be similar to the original scary thing is also a predictor of something good, and creates a good CER too. Men, men with hats, women, children, halters, lead lines, leashes, etc. We help the animal generalize the once-scary thing to anything that is similar to it.

Skill Building

Training

In order to train any animal we must first determine what they find reinforcing. We need to know what matters to them enough that they will perform specific behaviors in order to get it. The good things that animals are willing to work for are readily available to us, and not prohibitively expensive. Throughout the animal training industry the main reward (reinforcement) used is food. It may be that some animals will work for toys, ear scratches, or praise, but the animals we are working with should not be expected, or required to do so. We use food.

We need to be sure that we are not using pressure, proximity or force to get an animal to do something. We don't want them behaving because they want to get away from something, or to get something to stop happening. For example, walking



toward the animal to get them to move somewhere we want them to go, corralling them in or out of the house, stall or their crate. Or putting a leash on them and pulling them to get them to move. We may have to decide which interactions we need to have with an animal and which can wait until the animal is no longer scared by them.

Scared animals are not stupid. They can learn behaviors we'd like to see, without using force, so long as we keep them feeling safe. Simple, easy behaviors that an animal can do in their safe space are a good way to get started. What can your animal do? Can they look at you or orient toward you? Can they take a step in a specific direction? Can they touch something with their nose or other part of their body? Start the training conversation with an animal by reinforcing them for what might seem like simple behaviors. You are building the foundation for the training of more complex behaviors the animal will need to be successful in their new home.

On The Right Track

Improving The Lives of Animals

Thank you for your interest in learning more about helping scared animals. For many, their histories of abuse, neglect or trauma put them at risk for behaving aggressively. With patience, compassion and good information about learning and behavior, we can train them effectively, efficiently, safely and humanely.

This booklet does not cover all the details of training using positive reinforcement. We encourage you to seek out additional resources to improve your training skills.

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