

Animal Behavior Management Alliance (ABMA) Training and Enrichment Talks

Topic: Reducing Aggression

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Question: Aggression, whether directed towards another animal or towards a person, can become a dangerous situation. Even though aggression is a natural behavior in many animal species, it is a behavior that we try to avoid within our animal collections. What are some training strategies that may be used to decrease any aggressive or displacement behavior?

Answer 1: One of the most important skills that we try to develop at Natural Encounters is sensitivity to bird behavior. By being aware of the environment and slight changes in the bird's body language, it is often possible to avoid bird to human aggression. For instance, if there is a new object in the environment a trainer should expect that the bird's behavior may be affected when walking past the big scary object. Some signs that the bird may exhibit if they are feeling nervous are; slicked back feathers, eyes looking for an escape route, crouching as if to prepare for flight, or leaning away from the object. If the bird feels that it cannot escape from the situation it may turn to aggression. Some signs of aggression include; eye pinning, feathers fanned, biting, or lunging to bite in parrots. In hawks, some signs of aggression include; looking sideways over shoulder, head low, shoulders hunched, screaming, and footing. Our goal is to keep the birds as comfortable as possible. If a bird is feeling nervous a trainer can block the view of the new object. The trainer should also reinforce the bird for staying on the hand, and should always take the opportunity to reinforce any calm relaxed behavior.

When parrots live around humans it is possible for a bird to develop a strong bond to a person. The bird may then try to drive other humans out of its territory when its human mate is nearby. This can result in aggression towards the other trainers. We try to prevent these situations from occurring by refraining from interacting with the parrots in ways that may encourage bonding. We also encourage parrots to interact with other parrots by housing them together or in close proximity. Housing parrots together can sometimes cause problems when we try to pick up one of the pair bonded birds. By reinforcing one bird for remaining calm while the other is picked up aggression can often be avoided.

Aggression may occur when asking parrots to step up. We focus on positive reinforcement training and never force our birds to do anything, this includes stepping up. Moving a hand into the bird before the bird is ready may encourage the bird to swipe at the trainer's hand. However, by showing the bird a hand out of range of the parrot's beak and waiting for the bird to pick up his foot before the hand moves in, it gives the bird a chance to decide to step up and also does not take him by surprise.

The most important thing to remember when working through an aggression issue is to try to determine the animal's motivation for the aggression. Training an incompatible behavior to the aggression is very helpful as well. Most importantly, as a trainer we must take responsibility for the bird's behavior. Taking responsibility for bird behavior allows

us to take action to address the problem by asking what could have been done to prevent or avoid the undesired behavior.

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Answer 2: Animal to human aggression can be a very serious problem. Often technicians unknowing increase the aggressive behavior by trying to appease the animal. For example, a monkey is threatening and charging the front of the cage. The technician tries to "be friends" with the animal by giving the animal food. What in fact has really happened is that the technician is training the animal to continue his aggressive behavior by reinforcing it.

In our lab, the first step is to ignore all aggression. This does not mean to pretend it never happened, but rather not to react to it when it is happening. Once a problem animal has been identified, we set up a plan to decrease the aggression. With a monkey that is charging a cage or grabbing, we typically use a combination of DRO (differential reinforcement of other behaviors), habituation and extinction. We will stand in front of the cage at a distance the animal is comfortable with and reinforce the animal for any calm behavior. If an animal is grabbing food when we try to deliver it, we will pass very small items, through the smallest bars in the cage, thus eliminating the animal's ability to actually grab at us. It is also important to consider the animal's health if a generally calm animal suddenly seems more aggressive. The animal may have injured himself or have some other underlying health issue.

I find that some animals become aggressive when anyone new enters the picture. Aggression towards new people can be more quickly diminished when animals are trained to do a simple task such as targeting. Therefore the new person can ask the animal to perform the simple behavior and reinforce it. I find that new people who ask animals to perform simple behaviors and reinforce those behaviors are less likely to experience aggression than people who simply come in and give the animals food.

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Answer 3: Aggression in dogs is the most difficult and complicated behavioral problem to resolve. It presents itself in many different forms and overall its purpose is to alter the behavior of another animal or human. Fear aggression, dominance aggression, possessive aggression, dog - to - dog aggression, territorial aggression, food aggression, redirected aggression, and sexual aggression are just a few of the ways that it can manifest itself in canines. Obviously, I cannot discuss every type of aggression and how to work with it in this forum. Instead, I am going to attempt to share just a few interesting training strategies that I have learned over the past 15 years in which I have been professionally training dogs.

The best training strategy for training an aggressive dog is to find ways to manage or control the problem. One of the best ways to do this is to train a behavior that is not compatible with an unwanted behavior. For instance, if a dog lunges at people, teach a down stay. Or, if a dog has predatory aggression and likes to chase other creatures, teach an excellent recall. Teaching good obedience control is basically communicating to the

dog that the owner is in control and that the dog cannot make its own decisions.

Sometimes one of the dog's senses is overworking and causes the dog to be aggressive. In order for a desensitization program to work, the trainer has to figure out which sense is overworking. For example, if the owner says that the dog is fine as long as someone doesn't touch him, we know that he is touch sensitive. Or, for a dog that is smell sensitive and does not like strangers, you can try having guests come into the house wearing the owner's coat or have the guests put one of the dog's toys in their pocket. This way the guests smell familiar to the dog.

For some owners, living with their dog can be a nightmare because the dog is aggressive over its food. Walking by a dog that is food aggressive can result in a terrible bite. Some strategies to try on a dog that is food aggressive might be to place three bowls into a new environment (one other than what the dog is used to getting fed in) about 10" apart. As the dog finishes the food and moves to the next bowl, go to the empty bowl and put some chicken in it. Keep rotating around. Or, if the dog is not trying to bite, stroke the dog while adding chicken to the bowl. Both strategies teach the dog that having your presence near the food bowl is desirable.

Overall, it is important to keep in mind that aggression is a natural behavior. As a professional dog trainer, I am expected to provide a service to the pet owner population. I am often faced with difficult situations where I am expected to provide a finished product or fix the problem that the dog owner has brought to me. The only problem that I can fix is aggression that is predictable and has been learned. A general rule of thumb is if it is unpredictable and cannot be determined how it developed, then it is a veterinary problem. When it is predictable, often the only way I can help the owner is to look for ways to control the dog more than I am looking for ways to change the behavior.

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