

## **Science and Art in Training**

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### **Avian Ambassadors.**

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The internet provides a wonderful communication and research medium that allows easy sharing of knowledge and information and a visit to Yahoo! Groups will reveal many groups that are devoted to parrots and their training. As one reads through these groups it becomes apparent that many of those new to training struggle to understand the science of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). The terms can appear arcane and when “experts” attempt to explain them they often become embroiled deeply in the technicalities of the science. These often heated discussions are usually triggered by an innocent beginning trainer who just wants a better relationship with their companion parrot; to have it not bite the hand that feeds it. The effect of exposure of beginning trainers to ABA in depth in an abstract forum like an online discussion group can be extremely negative; it may even lead the reader to give up on what should have been a rewarding and exciting journey with their companion.

For me training did not start with learning the intricacies of ABA, it started with an animal and a challenge. The animal was a six week old bobcat that had been acquired by a nature park, and the challenge was to use the animal in educational programs. My approach was to talk to as many people as I could who had worked with these animals. I was probably fortunate in that the people I talked to encouraged me to avoid forcing the animal to do what I wanted and to make the desired behavior the easiest choice for the animal. There were other pearls of wisdom such as never allowing a behavior to become part of my relationship with the young animal that I would not like to see in an adult. That gem really paid off when about two years later I began working with a mountain lion. Mountain lion kittens look like loads of fun to roll around and play with, not so when they grow to almost 200 pounds.

During all of this time I was blissfully unaware of ABA, even though I was in fact using it every day. It was much later in my life as a trainer when I discovered that almost everything I did to train these animals had good science behind it. It is my nature to investigate and learn about new subjects that come into my life and this nature led me to study ABA and use it to improve my training techniques. I consider that during the period before I learned the science of ABA I was busy learning the art of training, preparing a fertile ground into which the seeds of ABA could be planted.

The art of animal training is not nearly as well defined as its science; it grows out of observation and experience. For example, knowing what a reinforcer is does not guarantee that the reinforcer is delivered optimally for the behavior being trained, or even that the best reinforcer has been chosen. The choice of reinforcer and the timing of its delivery are just two aspects of the art of

training. The range of skills that need to be developed to become a good trainer is wide indeed; much of this skill set just can not be acquired through reading and study alone. The art of training comes from the process of training itself; from making adjustments to a training plan as each step of the process is followed and from making mistakes and learning from those mistakes.

So where does that leave our companion parrot owner with the screaming cockatoo? How can they prepare themselves so that the precious seeds of ABA can grow and enrich their relationship with their parrot? I believe the answer lies in the method used to introduce ABA to the beginning trainer. Humans are very visual learners. How many times have you heard that someone needs to see something to understand it? ABA is no different to any other skill in that respect and in my opinion is best learned with a hands-on approach. This hands-on approach also works best when the student is under the direct guidance of an experienced trainer, a trainer who has the skills not just to explain the techniques but to enable the student to learn them. To my way of thinking there is nothing more inspiring than actually seeing a bird trained before your eyes, with each step of the way being carefully explained by the trainer.

Seeing the training process and appreciating that training is not a simple linear path from A to B is important. At each step between the start and the goal trainers make adjustments to their technique, to the environment, and to their expectations. By observing a good trainer and by having them explain what they are doing, the adjustments they are making, and why, students learn much more quickly. The "aha" moment comes earlier as the students experience the process of training. The student appreciates that there is in fact a journey from point A to point B and that the journey may have setbacks and changes of direction. Hopefully the trainer can also communicate that the journey can be as rewarding for the student as the goal itself, sometimes even more rewarding as the trainer works to understand the presentation (or lack of presentation) of particular elements of the behavior being trained.

I have been fortunate in my ABA journey of discovery to have had the opportunity to spend quality time with, and learn from, some of the best animal trainers. Sometimes the learning took place in formal study situations with structured lectures and presentations and sometimes by simply being an extra pair of willing hands cleaning the birds' housing at shows, while watching the training action up close. In the absence of the wonderful opportunities that presented themselves to me as I began my training journey I would encourage beginning trainers to enroll in workshops based upon ABA techniques and see the techniques working; to not become obsessed with the science too early and to relax and enjoy the journey.