

The Training Game



VIRGINIA
AQUARIUM
& MARINE SCIENCE CENTER

Learn how animals are taught behaviors using positive reinforcement during this interactive game.

Duration

Activity: 30 - 45 minutes

Supplies

- M&M's, Skittles, or other small treats
- Training clicker (optional)

Background

The training game is an exercise which places a person in the role of either an animal being trained or the trainer. The chosen trainer will teach the “human animal” a behavior during the game through successive approximation (baby steps). One of the most important aspects of this exercise is that it enables the “human animal” the opportunity to experience the confusion, and possible frustration, a real animal might experience during the training process. The trainer conducting the session may also learn how well he or she may or may not communicate effectively to an animal. Prior to beginning the game all participants and audience members should have a basic understanding of some fundamental training concepts and tools.

Check out a [training session](#) with the Virginia Aquarium.

Vocabulary

Training: the action of teaching a person or animal a skill or type of behavior.

Bridging: a signal that is conditioned to be reinforcing because it is paired with a primary reinforcement such as food. It can be any audible, visual, and even tactile cue to notify the subject that it has successfully completed a requested behavior.

Primary Reinforcement: something that is necessary in life and follows the bridge (Food, air, water).

LRS or Least Reinforcing Stimulus: a 3 to 5 second no response by the trainer for an incorrect response given by the animal following a signal.

Scanning technique: A trainer can teach an animal a behavior through observation and then capturing the desired responses that lead to the ultimate objective. The disadvantage of using this technique is if there is a behavioral breakdown, it is difficult to back up and retrace training steps.

Targeting technique: A trainer may shape a behavior by teaching the animal to touch, then follow the target to reach the desired goal. At some point, the trainer may then choose to incorporate a verbal cue into the behavior as the signal to ultimately tell the animal what to do.

Instructions

- 1) Establish the bridging stimulus (clicker or verbal “good”) and the reinforcement (M&M’s, Skittles, etc.). Allow time for the trainer to practice using the bridging tool before you start the game. You can use non-food reinforcement as well such as stickers or points.
- 2) To begin the game, identify a participant to act as the designated animal and as the trainer. The animal must leave the area so the trainer and observers can determine a behavior to teach and the strategy to accomplish the goal. If you are training a more complex behavior, map out what smaller behaviors you will need to train to get to the final goal. Once this is done, the animal may re-enter the room to begin the process.
- 3) The trainer may share his or her training goal with the observers, or just the educator to allow for the audience to guess the behavior.
- 4) The trainer will only be able to communicate with the animal using the bridging tool (clicker or verbal cue) and reinforcement item during the training session. They will not be able to explain or gesture to help their animal understand the desired behavior. If they see the animal doing a behavior that resembles their intended goal, they will bridge with their tool (clicker), so the animal knows the reinforcement is coming. If the trainer does not see the animal completing a behavior that resembles their goal, they will do nothing acting as the LRS. This exercise works like hot or cold game. If the animal gets close to a behavior, the trainer will indicate there are hot (or close) by bridging. If they are not close to the behavior, the trainer will indicate they are cold (not close) by doing nothing.
- 5) If those observing know what the behavior is prior to the start of the game, or they feel they have figured out the behavior while the training process is continuing, it is very important they do not react during the game. Noises or laughter can help or even confuse the animal.
- 6) Once the behavior has been complete or the educator determines a stopping point, debrief as a whole group. Ask both the trainer and animal how they felt during the process. What was difficult? What emotions were you feeling? Did the trainer communicate effectively? Were you motivated by the reinforcement?
- 7) Select more participants to act as the trainer and animal until each person has a turn in both roles.

Extensions

Have students create a training plan for a behavior they would like to train with their pet. Have them record the steps they would need to take in succession to reach that behavior goal.