

TIMING MATTERS: Practical use of food (and more) for Cooperative Care

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WHAT IS COOPERATIVE CARE?

Cooperative Care (and Cooperative Veterinary Care) include working with animals rather than working "on" animals, and holding space for the emotional and intellectual welfare of the animals while also caring for their physical bodies. Cooperative Care may encompass many techniques including stabilization and support, distraction, touch gradient, counterconditioning, and fancy trained behaviors for access of body parts, injections, grooming, and more!

WHAT WE NEED TO SUCCEED

Most often, some variety of intentional stimulus-stimulus pairing will be involved. The goal is to provide something the animal learner likes, enjoys, and desires associated with the antecedents and behaviors around caregiving.

At the same time, we hope to avoid creating conflict for the animal. Sometimes if a very high value food, toy, etc is offered, it can be exceedingly difficult for the animal to walk away or opt out of the interaction. A strong desire for the intended reinforcer can conflict with the desire to move away from equipment or handling. Using very high value items can mask the more subtle body language animals use to communicate mild discomfort, hindering our conversation between learner and handler.

For success, we will need a few things:

- Multiple items or interactions the animal enjoys/seeks/desires
- Multiple ways to deliver these items (dish, lick mat, roll/toss, feed from hand, wait to be sent, tug/give/seek toy, etc.)
- A comfortable work space with non-slip footing
- A clear picture of the end goal (injection, brushing, nail care, etc)
- A creative and finely tuned breakdown of many possible contributing steps or approximations of the end goal
- Sufficient mechanical skills on the part of the handler to complete the procedure (eg. comfort with nail care in an unafraid animal, comfort with administering injections, using shavers/clippers, etc)
- A good understanding of where, when, and how the animal prefers to receive their fun item
- A clear understanding of the feasibility of our plan
 - what is the item, is it compatible with the planned procedure?

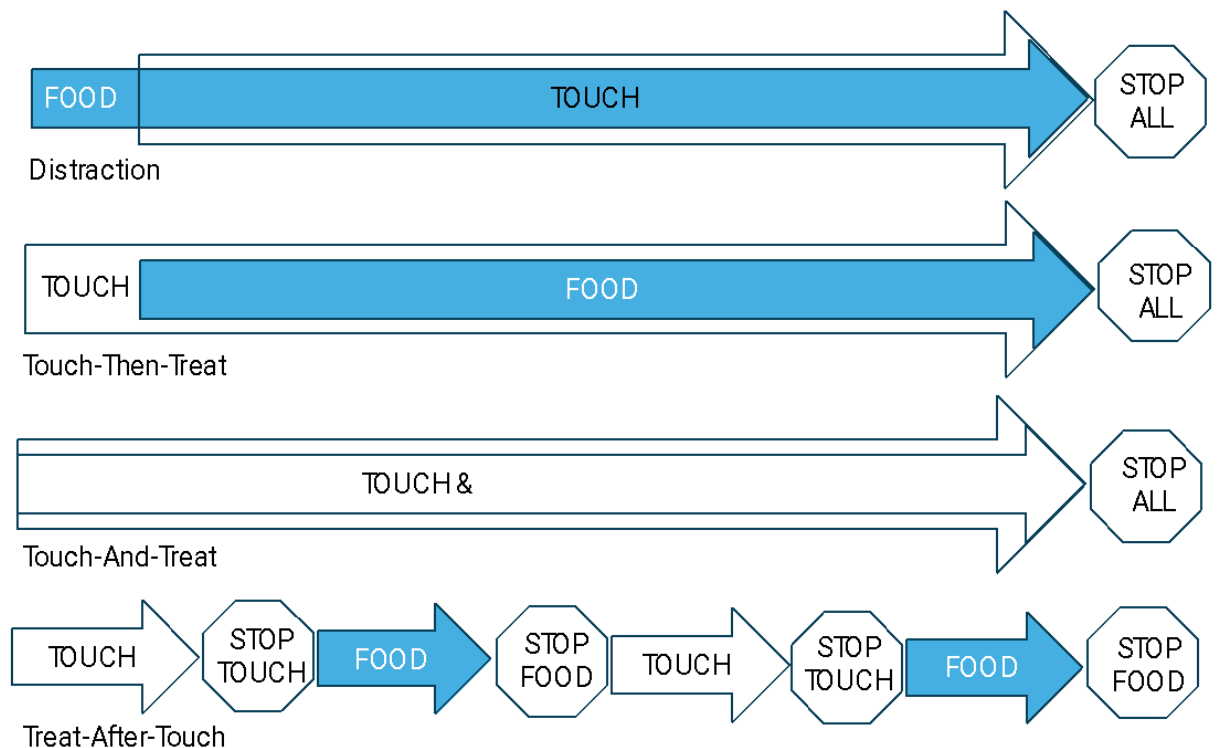
- For example: a crunchy treat + stethoscope over the heart = can't hear a thing!, tugging on a toy + nail trim = a moving target

TIMING MATTERS

When we pair stimuli such as a nail clipper and a piece of chicken (for example), the way these are paired matter.

Individual animals will have different preferences for how they like stimuli paired! One of those preferences involves *when* the stimuli are presented relative to one another. (Where and How are also important, but let's start with When).

To determine the animal's preference, I will pair the stimuli using several of four different timing sequences. (See figure)



To conduct trials:

- Consider ahead of time how you will present the fun item, make a plan before you interact.
- Consider the animal's baseline response to the planned interaction, and plan an interaction you believe will *not* prompt a stress response.
- Conduct the trial over 1-3 repetitions.
- Carefully observe the animal's body language and communication

- o You've identified a preferred scenario if you observe:
 - Seeking and soliciting a repeat/another rep
 - Absence of stress/avoidance
 - Animal chooses close proximity, observes with relaxed posture and interest
- o You've identified a less desired scenario if you observe:
 - Stress response
 - Avoidance
 - Animal chooses to do another activity
 - Animal observes from close or far with muscle tension/posture ready to move away

Once you have conducted the trials, make a note of what timing the animal prefers.

Some animals will seem to be equally comfortable with multiple methods, while others show a very clear preference.

Also, the animal's preference may vary depending upon the procedure!
 For example, the same animal might like touch-then-treat for nail care, but prefer touch-AND-treat for brushing. Not sure? Test each care picture with different timing options and select what the pet prefers.

Additionally, the animal's preference may evolve over time as they develop a more clear understanding of the care picture. Be willing to constantly observe and re-evaluate each situation, adjusting and adapting to the needs of the learner.

Many animals can learn to like multiple methods with gentle well-considered practice.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN TRAINING

Touch Gradient

- Initiate touch in a less sensitive area and glide to the area of interest
- Learn the individual "Body Map" of the specific animal to inform less/more sensitive areas
- Observe whether the animal prefers removing hands/equipment and starting a new rep or pausing in place before continuing

Positioning the Pet

- Non-slip surface
- Ergonomic/non-painful positioning which feels secure and supported
- Easy for the human to complete their part of the job without pain, efficiently, correctly

Positioning the Fun Stuff

- In view of the animal or out of view?

- Where does the animal drift (or do they) depending where the item is?
- Does the presence of the item prompt certain behaviors?
- Can the position of the item help the animal understand more quickly?

Clinical Relevance

Animal learners are so clever and observant. Many clients will report their animals seem "fine" with general handling but they "can tell" when things are "real" and will show an escalation of stress during actual treatments or care compared with training sessions.

Things to consider:

- Does what I am practicing actually resemble the real event?
- Where are the differences from the animal's perspective?
- How can I improve the animal's comfort with these differences?

Some of the most common differences animals tend to notice in my clinical experience:

- Adding a second person to the handling
- Adding a second hand to the same body part
- Touching with the "third hand" AKA visual inspection
- Intentional touching/intent to perform a task (our body language shows this)
- Adding any kind of equipment held in the hand
- Tactile contact from the equipment

Learning History is SO Important

The learning history of the individual animal will play an important role in determining the best way to provide their care.

If the animal has a pre-existing fear of the planned procedure, other similar handling, specific foods or toys, or specific environments, the training plan will need to be tailored to protect them from a worsening fear response.

Further, each animal will have their own tolerance and comfort with different kinds of touch and handling, even if they don't have a known prior stressful or painful experience. These individual differences deserve our attention and care as we create a training plan.