

Objective: Students will use their critical thinking skills to create a training plan and gain an understanding of *Operant Conditioning*.

You will need:

- A willing friend or family member
- Their favorite treat

Directions:

Animals at the zoo are trained using Operant Conditioning. When an animal does something we like, we reward the behavior. Normally, in Operant Conditioning, you would also discourage the behaviors you don't want by adding something negative or taking away something positive. However, at the zoo, we train using only positive reinforcement, so if they give us the behavior we want, we give them something they like. If they don't, we don't punish them, we just ask for the behavior again. This gives the animal free choice and they can choose if they want to participate.

In this activity, you will be training a friend or family member. When you train, it must be done in baby steps, and you reward each step until you reach your goal behavior. First, decide what behavior you want your person to do and what steps you need to take to reach your goal—this is called a training plan. For example, if I wanted to train somebody to pick up a cup, I would first start by rewarding them when they moved closer to the cup. Next, I would reward them if they reached their arm towards the cup. Next, when they touched the cup. You would continue until they reached the desired behavior of picking up the cup. For the purpose of this activity, when they do the desired behavior, say "good!" (this is called a verbal bridge). You can train your person to do anything that you want with this method!

Now try adding something!

Repeat the activity again, but this time, tell them "no" when they don't do the desired behavior. This is called positive punishment. You are adding something they don't like (the word "no"). Was it easier or harder? Did your person get to the desired behavior quicker, or did it take longer?

While it might take longer to reach a desired behavior using only positive reinforcement, it creates a positive bond with the trainer and the animal, and allows the animal to have free choice in the training. The animal's well-being is put first and foremost!

Vocabulary:

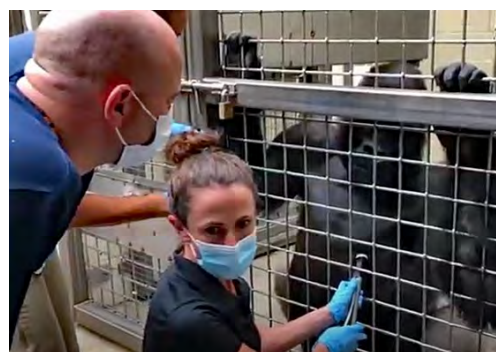
Operant Conditioning: is a method of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behavior. Through *operant conditioning*, an individual makes an association between a particular behavior and a consequence (Skinner, 1938).



This harbor seal learned to touch his nose to a target. Can you train somebody to touch a target?



The Red River Hogs here at the zoo find belly rubs more reinforcing than food! What are some other reinforcers you might be able to use?



Training is important to help with husbandry behaviors which allow animals to participate in their own health care. This keeps the animal as stress free as possible during medial check ups.