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ARRANGING ANTECEDENTS

A positive approach to solving behaviour problems



by Lisa Desatnik, CPDT-KA, CPBC

For more than 18 years, I shared my home with a voracious chewer named Chester. He was an endearing soulmate who went with me to visit adults in a assisted care home, helped me mentor a young girl in need of a positive role model, and just kept me laughing — a lot.

That is, except for the time when I heard from my apartment office a loud **CRUNCH** coming from my dining room and quickly dropped the phone to run out and find a gaping hole in one of my dining room chairs...next to where Chester was standing.

Admittedly, I was furious. But when I was honest with myself, I knew the brunt of blame needed to be on me. After all, I often kept his cage door open when I was there, and he was simply an Alexandrian Ringneck who was looking for something to do, and something to chew on.

He had his — very strong — needs, and from his standpoint, that chair looked like a good option. So often we bring animals into our homes and then get frustrated with them

when they do things we do not like. We should realize, however, that they have needs just as we do. If we do not give them appropriate choices for getting their needs met, then they will come up with their own ideas...ones we may not like.

Antecedent Arrangement to the Rescue

Luckily for me, I had begun learning from Dr. Susan Friedman about Applied Behaviour Analysis, a systematic approach to solving behaviour problems by changing the environment in which the behaviour occurs, rather than focusing on changing the animal. It involves looking at the very specific behaviour and the related environmental context that surrounds it.

We ask, "What happened immediately before the behaviour to set it in motion (**the antecedent**) and what occurred immediately after the behaviour (**consequence**) to reinforce or punish it.

There are many circumstances where focusing on the antecedent *alone* can solve behaviour issues. It most certainly did in my case. When I bought my house (and a new dining room set), I was determined to set us up for success so as to avoid a repeat of having my furniture destroyed.

What did I do? In my case with Chester, the antecedents were his proximity to the furniture, his open cage door, and his lack of appropriate chew choices on his cage. I did a number of things. I did not want to keep his door closed, so I focused on placement of his cage and providing him with other enrichment opportunities.

I transformed one of my bedrooms into the bird room (I had two other birds, whom I still have, and also gave them a lot of enrichment options.) To lessen his motivation for seeking out furniture, every day I supplied him with A LOT of options for chewing in and around his cage.

He had rolled up phone books, cardboard boxes, chunks of wood, vegetables on skewers, and more. For the occasion that he would come off the floor (or I would put him on the floor when supervised), I made play stations for him. Chester loved a baby toy I found that is a mirror on wheels so I got him several of those and surrounded it with beads (which he also loved) and other things to keep his interest. Chester had so much to keep his interest on his cage that he rarely would come off, but in those circumstances where he would venture away, he immediately sought out one of his play stations.



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Far left and above: Chester, the author's companion of many years, takes a moment to consider a myriad of options for play.

His behaviour of chewing on furniture (and destroying my house) was successfully eliminated without any need for using negative reinforcement. And, his life was enriched in the process.

When Chester died in my arms, my loss was traumatic. He taught me so much about behaviour. One of those lessons was the importance of stopping the blame and looking for the most positive and humane solutions to behaviour problems. Sometimes those solutions are simply rearranging the environment to make the wanted behaviour the easiest and best choice for the animal. ☐

About the Author

Lisa Desatnik, CPDT-KA, CPBC, is a certified parrot behaviour consultant through the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC), teaching the most positive and humane strategies for preventing and solving pet behaviour problems.

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