

# TEACHING TO TARGET



Target training affords all of the enriching aspects of other foraging experiences – anticipation, problem solving, discovery and reward.

© Chris Shank

THERE ARE SEVERAL BENEFITS TO HAVING A PARROT THAT TARGETS. YOU CAN USE THE TARGET TO TEACH OTHER BEHAVIOURS, SUCH AS THE 'TURN AROUND', MOVING TO A NEW LOCATION, GOING INTO A CARRIER ON CUE, OR CLIMBING A LADDER.

Targeting is the behaviour of touching a body part to an object. Here's how to teach a parrot to target:

- 1 Select a target stick you will use for training, such as a chopstick.
- 2 Prepare an assortment of favoured treat rewards such as small nut pieces or seeds to use for positive reinforcement. *(The smaller the better.)*
- 3 Have your parrot perch on his cage, or at another comfortable and familiar spot.
- 4 Offer a treat to assess his interest. If he takes it readily, eats it and looks to you for more, you are free to proceed to the next step as this indicates he will be motivated to participate in your training session. If he eats it slowly or takes it and drops it, it will be best to postpone training for another time, such as right before a meal.

**!** TIP: YOU DON'T WANT THE BIRD TO GET FULL TOO QUICKLY, OR TAKE TOO LONG TO EAT EACH TREAT, AS THIS LIMITS THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU CAN SPEND TRAINING.

- 5 Watch and wait to ensure you have his attention; stand with arms at your sides, treat in one hand and target stick in the other.
- 6 Slowly raise the target stick so that it is right in front of his beak. If he doesn't reach out to touch the stick, lower your arm to your side, wait a few seconds, and then try again. (Don't reward a slow response.)

- 7 Watch carefully to see if the sight of it frightens him in any way. If he seems wary of the target stick, you may need to pair it with reinforcers that will counter condition him to interact with the target:

- Hold the target stick against your side as you begin to offer very small treats. Very slowly, begin to move the target stick upwards toward your elbow.
- Once you can offer him treats with the target stick at your elbow and he takes them readily, you can begin to move it along your forearm slowly toward the hand that is offering the treats. By doing so, he will begin to regard the target stick as a positive thing, because you are pairing the sight of it with treats he values.
- Eventually, you will get the target stick up to where it is even with your treat hand. When you think he is ready, move the target stick slightly forward so that he touches it before you give him the treat.

**!** TIP: IF AT ANY TIME HE SEEMS WARY, YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAST. GO BACK TO THE LAST STEP AT WHICH HE ACCEPTED THE TREATS EASILY.

- 8 When he does touch the target, say "Yes!" and quickly reward him with a treat. As you do so, lower your target hand back to your side.

- 9 Continue in this way, holding the target stick up so that he can touch it and rewarding him each time with a treat. *(If he bites the stick, try holding it a little further away so that he can physically only touch it.)*

- 10 When he understands exactly what he is supposed to do, start to make the targeting a bit more difficult by holding the target an inch to the right and then the left so that he has to lean a bit to touch it. Hold it a little higher than his beak so that he has to reach up, or lower so that he has to bend down to target.

- 11 Next, hold the target so that he has to take a step in one direction or another in order to touch it. Continue to work in this manner until he will walk the length of the perch or the cage in order to come and touch the target stick. Always reward him with a "Yes" and a treat.

Once he targets well and repeatedly in the spot you have chosen to work, expand your training to other desired locations around the house so that the behaviour becomes generalized. 📌



© Thomas K3 via CC0

## MORE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

### Duration

Keep training sessions limited to about five minutes. You can have more than one session in any given day, but the length should be limited.

### Motivation

If your parrot seems to lack motivation, try the following:

- Find a different reinforcer that has more value than what you have been offering.
- Try training at different times of the day.
- If your parrot eats a seed mix, you may need to cut down on the amount you offer in his dish and use the balance for training.

### Frequency

Don't feel obligated to train every single day. You'll be amazed at his ability to pick up where you left off.

### Download the full article

Adapted from Pamela Clark's article "Teaching Your Parrot to Target", available online at: [parrots.org](http://parrots.org) > Learn > Reference Library > Behaviour & Training



### About the Author

Pamela Clark CPBC, CVT is an IAABC certified parrot behaviour consultant whose base of experience includes work also as a trainer, veterinary technician, breeder, and rehabber.

To book a consultation or read more of her free resources — including her popular behaviour blog — visit her website [pamelaclarkonline.com](http://pamelaclarkonline.com), or find her on Facebook (@TheParrotSteward).