

# Right On TARGET

Teach  
your  
bird a  
new way  
to “Step  
Up” &  
much  
more.

By S.G. Friedman,  
Ph.D.  
and Lori Wilson  
photos by Timothy Wilson

If you ask a group of parrot lovers, “What’s the most important behavior to teach pet parrots?” without giving it a second thought, many people would respond, “Step Up!”

That’s what we used to say, too. Then one day, my daughter sent me a photo she’d taken in Washington, D.C., with the caption, “How do you walk a bunch of lil’ kids to the city museum and get back to school with the same number you left with?” The answer: Teach them to target just like Lori Wilson taught Lil’ Dude the Pacific parrotlet (*Forpus coelestis*)! So we gave it a second thought and decided that targeting should be added to the list of very important skills to teach our parrots.

## REACH OUT & TOUCH

Targeting is the behavior of touching a designated object, the target, with a designated body part, like a hand or beak. We hardly notice the many different examples of targeting behavior that occur every day. In the case of the little kids on their way to the museum, the children learned to target a rope with their hands to earn praise and a field trip. Toddlers readily target adults’ outstretched hands with their own little hands. And, school kids quickly learn to target their seats with their bottoms when their teacher gives the cue, “Sit down!”

Lil’ Dude learned to target a coffee stirrer with his beak to earn praise; a click sound and a bite of millet. Birds routinely target their perches with their feet when presented with a dowel inside their cages or on playgyms. And some birds target their caregiver’s lips with their beaks, also known as giving kisses. Even stepping onto our hands is an example of targeting.



1. Lori clicks the instant Lil' Dude looks at the target. This is called an event marker and it communicates, "Yes! That's it!" Praise can be a good event marker, too.



2. Lil' Dude gets his treat right after the click to strengthen its meaning as an event marker and to increase "looking-at-stick" behavior.



3. Lori clicks the instant Lil' Dude touches the target with his beak, and then delivers his treat. Lori won't reinforce just looking at it anymore (unless Lil' Dude shows hesitation touching in the future).

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Children are taught to target from an early age. These young kids are targeting a rope with their hands to keep everyone together and safe during their museum field trip.

Teaching parrots to target a stick or other object with their beaks is a great learning goal because it gives us a hands-off way to guide their movements. It also gives us the opportunity to enrich their lives with fun activities and lots of positive reinforcement.

## LET YOUR IMAGINATION SOAR

What can you do with a parrot that touches its beak to a stick? The answer, says trainer Catherine Crammer is, "What couldn't we do with it?" Below are several suggestions for how targeting can be used to improve our interactions with our parrots. Let your imagination soar with even more ideas.

- **A parrot that is uncomfortable interacting with humans can be taught to touch a target stick while it remains securely inside its cage.** This can be the beginning of a great relationship that can lead to future hands-on contact. It also provides an

opportunity for in-cage exercise.

- **A parrot that avoids going into its cage, stepping onto hands, or getting off shoulders can be taught to follow a target to the desired location without force or coercion.** This positive approach can change a chronic objector into a cooperative partner.

- **A parrot with a strong targeting response can be redirected to the target and away from charging, chasing, or biting.** This can turn a probable disaster into a positive reinforcement interaction in the blink of an eye.

- **Targeting can be part of teaching medical and husbandry behaviors such as stepping onto a towel or scale, going in and out of a travel cage, and bathing.** Eventually, the behavior can be paired with a different cue, such as a hand signal or word, and the target stick faded out of the picture.

- **With targeting skill, parrots can learn new fun behaviors such as turning in a circle, climbing up and down ladders, and ringing a bell.** This can enrich their lives in captivity by adding stimulation, problems to solve and physical exercise. It also increases productive one-on-one time with their caregivers. This is much preferred to shoulder or perch potatoes.

## TEACH YOUR PARROT TO TARGET

Training a parrot to target is not hard when you follow the principles and procedures of positive reinforcement teaching. The key to great teaching is to arrange the environment to make the desired behavior comfortable to do and very rewarding. Here are the basic steps to help you train touching a target.

- **Decide on the object that will serve as the target.** This can be a chopstick, coffee stirrer, or even your closed hand. This item should be used only for targeting (touching with beak), not for other purposes such as a perching.

- **Identify a favorite item, activity or food treat to reward the desired behavior.** Present the target as close to the bird as you can while ensuring that the bird remains comfortable. Some birds will touch the target right away and

# 10 TEACHING TIPS

**1** Behind every parrot behavior is a reason; behavior serves a purpose.

**2** To discover the reason look at what happens right after the behavior, the consequence.

**3** Parrots naturally choose behavior that yields the most positive consequences, called positive reinforcers.

**4** The tricky thing is that every parrot is an individual and has a personal parrot point of view about which consequences are positive reinforcers.

**5** To learn what your parrot's positive reinforcers are, carefully observe favorite activities, people and food treats.

**6** You can increase your parrot's good behavior by giving reinforcers immediately and consistently for small improvements toward the final behavior goal.

**7** The bad news is you can unintentionally reinforce problem behaviors too, for example, petting a screaming bird to quiet it.

**8** To avoid problem behaviors, take care not to reinforce them

in the first place. Arrange the environment carefully to make the right behavior easier than the wrong behavior.

**9** Empowering parrots to make choices is essential to behavioral health; facilitate rather than force.

**10** You get what you reinforce, so catch your parrot being good!

How do you walk a bunch of Lil' Kids to the city museum and get back to school with the same number you left with? The same way you teach Lil' Dude: Right on target!

# Every click is followed by a treat.

you can capture the behavior with quick delivery of the reinforcers. Other birds will learn better by rewarding small steps starting with looking at the target, leaning toward the target, moving toward the target and, ultimately, touching the target with the beak.

- **Reward each step consistently and immediately to communicate clearly to your parrot what behavior produces the reinforcers.** Praise or click the instant your bird does the right behavior to “mark” it and then strengthen the marker by delivering a treat or other strong reinforcer every time you praise or click. As your parrot gets closer with each step, discontinue reinforcing the previous steps.

- **If your bird grabs the target, calmly let it go.** After a few minutes of exploring the stick, your bird will get back to work finding the behavior-consequence contingency, which is: When the stick is in view, if you touch the stick gently, then you will earn reinforcers. If grabbing the stick yields less reinforcement, the behavior will decrease in favor of touching the stick.

- **Once the bird is touching the target without hesitation, start moving it around so that your parrot has to move to touch the target.** Hold it left, right, high, low, closer and further away. If you need to go back to an easier, step, don't hesitate to do so and then slowly raise your criterion for reinforcement again. Sometimes you have to go back to go forward. The idea is to have fun learning together.

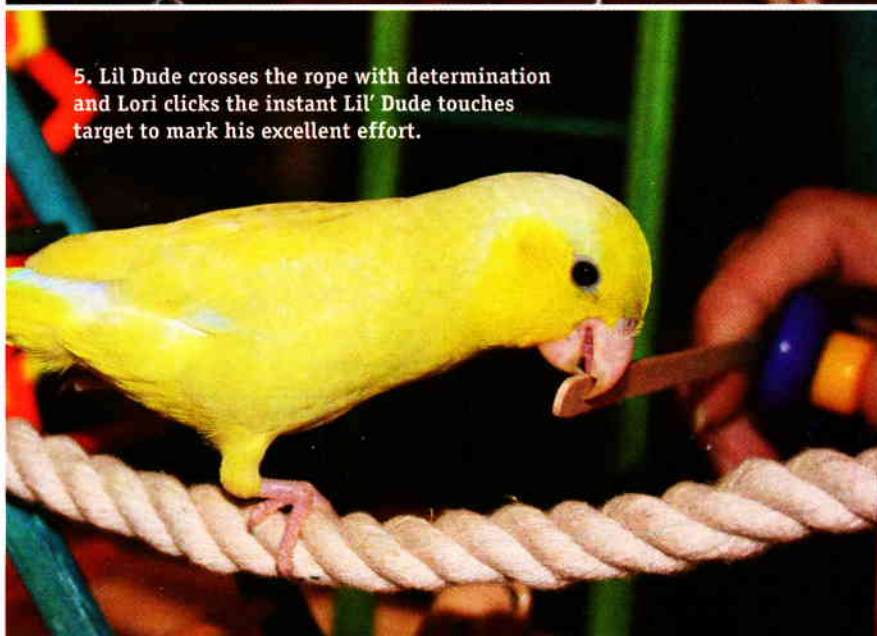
## WHERE THE BEAK GOES THE BODY WILL FOLLOW

Targeting is an important behavior for all parrots living with humans. With targeting we can guide parrots to move in ways that protect, manage and enrich their

4. Lori tests Lil' Dude's understanding of targeting by increasing the criterion for getting the click-treat. Lil' Dude marches over to the target without hesitation.



5. Lil' Dude crosses the rope with determination and Lori clicks the instant Lil' Dude touches target to mark his excellent effort.



6. Every click is followed by a treat. This consistency produces the clearest communication between teacher and learner.



# LORI & LIL' DUDE'S TRAINING LOG

## THE FIRST STEPS I TOOK IN TRAINING LIL' DUDE

was discovering what would be the best treat to use for training. This should be the parrot's favorite treat. In Dude's case, he was partial to safflower seeds; he loves them but he couldn't eat one fast enough to be used for training, so I decided use millet seed instead. Dude didn't have a problem with millet but I was having a hard time steadying the whole spray to actually get it to his beak. Once the "Aha!" moment hit me, I began using just a bud of millet and Dude's formal training began. Sometimes it's the human who needs the training (well all the time really).

I decided to use a clicker to be even faster at marking the right behavior than offering the food alone. It only took him one afternoon to associate the click sound with the reward. Dude was ready to move on to targeting.

I will be the first to admit I am not the most coordinated individual. It was a little troublesome holding the clicker, my Starbucks coffee stirrer (the target stick) and the millet bud all together. I practiced without Dude first, trying to perfect my technique. I was a much slower learner than he was. I took Dude out and put him on his play gym while I was setting up his training perch, getting the clicker, plucking the millet buds and finding the coffee stirrer. My plan was to put him on his perch for target training sessions.

I guess he got curious as to what his mom was doing. I had the clicker and target stick in one hand and as I was trying to position the clicker I must have gotten a little close to Dude. Before I knew it, he approached the stick and nipped it. At this point I was a little startled but I clicked and fumbled for the millet I had next to me.

I wasn't quite sure what to do next — did he really get it that fast? Did I click and reward in time to communicate that touching the stick was what got me to click and treat? I had to find out. I took a deep breath — got myself centered and ready to do it for real this time. I placed the stir stick a few inches in front of his beak, he nipped it, and I clicked and treated. I felt like the guy in "My Fair Lady" as we began to talk the same language. I then began to move the stick to dif-

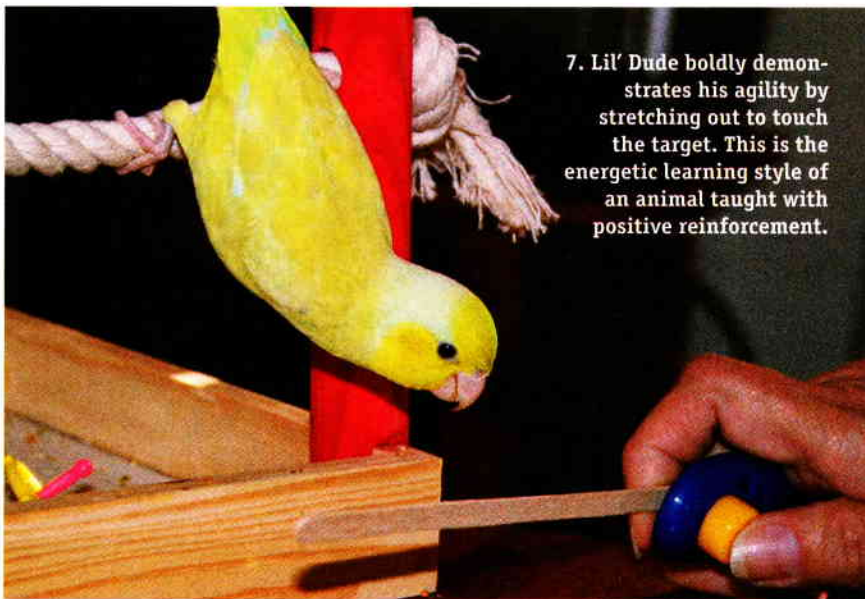


Lori says that Lil' Dude chirps like crazy until they have their daily training session.

ferent positions. I was so excited I never remembered to move him to his training perch.

I held the stick to the left, to the right, behind him, below him, above him, at the top of his ladder and at the bottom of his ladder. It didn't matter where I put the stick, Dude would target it. I was amazed but still not convinced he could have learned so quickly. I also wanted my then fiancée, now husband Timothy Wilson, to witness my little wonder bird and take photos. I ran outside, grabbed Timothy and had him get the camera. I then started with the targeting again and Dude continued his earlier success with photos to document his training. Lil' Dude was amazing!

**AUTHORS' NOTE:** This article is written in memory of Lil' Dude, who passed away due to an unexpected illness. He made a big mark for such a lil' fellow, and continues to do so.



7. Lil' Dude boldly demonstrates his agility by stretching out to touch the target. This is the energetic learning style of an animal taught with positive reinforcement.

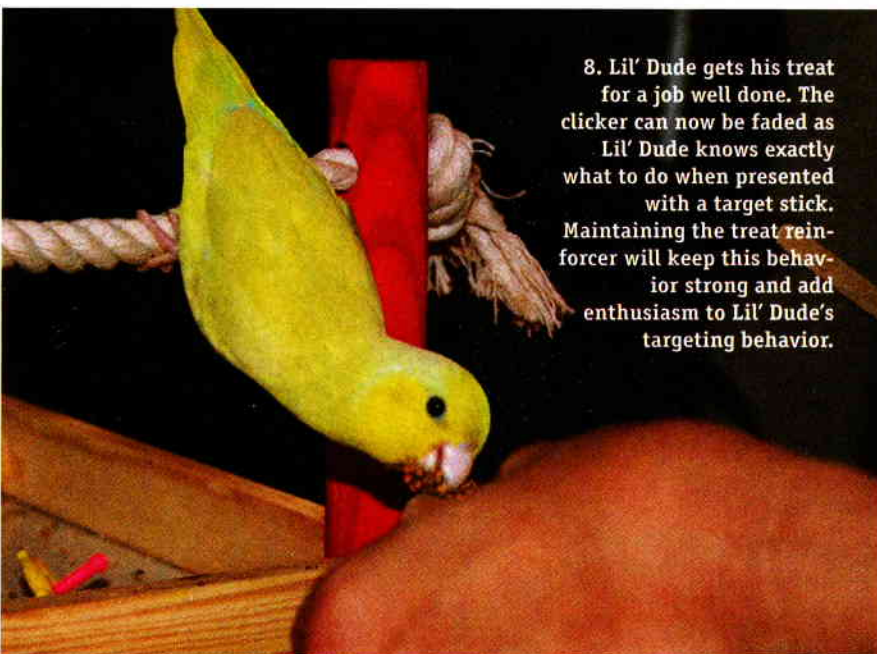
lives without force or coercion of any kind. Depending on a parrot's history with humans, stepping onto a hand or even being touched can be an advanced behavior. Teaching targeting allows us to build a positive relationship first, before we ask for more than some birds can comfortably give. Every bird is an individual — a study of one — and our teaching plans should be customized accordingly.

Target training is also a great first behavior for beginning trainers to teach their parrots. By focusing on delivering a high rate of well-timed reinforcement for small approximations toward the end goal, your training sessions will be right on target. ■

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*fessor at Utah State University. Her area of expertise is learning and behavior with a special emphasis on children's behavior disorders. Susan also works with companion parrot caregivers, animal trainers, veterinarians and zoo staff to apply to animals the same humane, scientifically sound teaching strategies that have been so effective with human learners, called Applied Behavior Analysis. The guiding principal of this approach is a hierarchy of teaching interventions starting with the most positive, least intrusive, effective behavior solutions.*

*Lori Wilson lives in Sacramento, CA, where she shares her home with her husband and their seven parrots, including three parrotlets, Lori is a proud graduate of Susan Friedman's on-line behavior class, "Living and Learning with Parrots."*



8. Lil' Dude gets his treat for a job well done. The clicker can now be faded as Lil' Dude knows exactly what to do when presented with a target stick. Maintaining the treat reinforcer will keep this behavior strong and add enthusiasm to Lil' Dude's targeting behavior.

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