

ENHANCING SOCIALIZATION

Socialization Objectives include:

- Meeting the social needs of all group members
- Reducing aggression to “normal” or acceptable levels
- Increasing pro-social behaviors
- Gaining access to *all* individuals within group for management, husbandry, and veterinary needs

Socialization training can be far more subtle than training animals to present body parts, tolerate veterinary behaviors, etc. With socialization training, it's essential that staff understand species-appropriate and normal social behavior, and know individual nuances. Social behavior can be very subtle and easy to overlook or misinterpret, and therefore careful observation and thorough understanding of the species and individual animals to be trained is essential.

Socialization Techniques

Targeting can be useful to enhance socialization training by managing dominant animal's movement, heading off aggressive actions, and allowing subordinates to choose to approach. For example, a dominant animal can be stationed on a target, allowing a subordinate animal the opportunity to slowly approach without feeling in imminent danger of being chased. Targets allow trainers to provide a clear location where each animal is to come to, go to, or stay. Targets for stationing can also be used as 'cool down' locations. The 'cool down' station is particularly useful with animals that are socially incompetent and may tend to get worked up when faced with social tension. The 'cool down' allows them an escape to a safe location where they'll get positive reinforcement and at the same time, this can disrupt inappropriate behavior and allow everyone to 'reset'.

Group shifting is beneficial as it allows the group of animals to be reinforced for moving together and offers improved access to the enclosure. Because all animals are reinforced for moving as a group, the concept of working together is reinforced.

Cooperative feeding is a specific technique used to enhance positive social behavior and reduce aggressive behavior. It does not mean simply feeding animals together, even though that is how it may appear. Cooperative feeding works by using the bridge to specifically reinforce dominant individuals for allowing sub-dominants to receive food, attention, or other desirable resources. With repetition, two noteworthy changes occur: 1) dominants become more patient and learn to tolerate another animal receiving food, and 2) sub-dominants learn confidence and become 'braver' in accepting the food because chasing and threats from dominant are reduced. When cooperative feeding is used, dominance is recognized, and *no attempt is made to eliminate or change that dominance*. It is also important to note that aggression is a normal component of a social animal's behavioral repertoire, and it is not a goal of cooperative feeding to eliminate aggression, only bring it to acceptable levels.

Cooperative feeding can be used when animals share the same space or when they are physically separated – as long as they can see each other, or at least such that the dominant can see the sub-dominant receive food/attention/etc. When used this way, cooperative feeding is a helpful technique prior to or in association with introductions.

Because animals understand their place in the social hierarchy, cooperative feeding, when appropriately applied, 'makes sense' to the animals. When working with different subsets within a group, who is

dominant or submissive may change; if this occurs, simply adjust which individual is reinforced as the 'dominant'... and they understand this very well due to their natural understanding of the hierarchy. Note that cooperative feeding may be enhanced and facilitated by teaching dominants to 'station' on a target or to station in a position such as 'sit' and 'stay'. Training the dominant to station provides a specific incompatible behavior that the trainer can reinforce, and this can also help the sub-dominant feel a bit more confident and therefore willing to approach and take food or get attention.

When beginning cooperative feeding, the following can be helpful tips:

- Always have something 'better' or of greater magnitude for the dominant(s)
- The dominant should be set up for success, which means understanding his/her tolerance, establishing 'station' or other helpful behavior before starting the coop feed training, considering distance from subordinates, which subordinates to start with, etc.
- Using multiple trainers, distance between animals, enclosure features, etc. to set up the training will help the dominant 'allow' the training to happen (i.e., 'be successful), and also help the subordinate feel safe enough to participate. If using distance or enclosure features or physical separation, make sure that the dominant can see the subordinate – the idea isn't to hide what's happening.
- If using multiple trainers and when ready to reduce the number of trainers, back the subordinate's trainers out first so the dominant has 'his/her' trainer for the duration. It may be necessary to up the rate and/or magnitude of reinforcement for dominant when taking this step. Regress in shaping plan if needed (e.g. when subordinate trainer backs out, dominant trainer takes over but rather than handing sub food, tosses it to stay with dom)
- In large group, start with dominant and any other individuals he/she will allow to approach
- Dominant allows food to be offered to subordinate who may or may not be 'brave' enough to take it – this is ok because the objective was to offer or toss food to sub and dom allow that to happen (e.g. not chase)
- Station and reinforce dominants before beginning the formal cooperative feeding
- If using distance between animals and you're ready to bring them closer together, move subordinate closer to dominant. Moving dominants may frighten sub-dominants
- Do everything to create a safe environment
- Use technique beyond scope of 'sessions' – whenever food, EE, attention (or other desirable resources) are provided, give in a cooperative feeding manner.
- Reinforce non-interference – be sure to pay attention to what the dominant individuals are doing – if they allow subordinates to have something or don't interfere (e.g. when sub is getting trained), be sure to reinforce.

Sneaking Food

Compare cooperative feeding to 'sneaking food'. By 'sneaking food', we mean throwing some food to the dominant to distract him/her so that you can quickly provision or 'sneak' food to the sub-dominants. While this may seem like a reasonable approach, it is more often counter-productive because dominants can typically keep watch on the entire space and chasing, aggression, submission and food-guarding may increase.

Gentle touch and Proximity training increases the opportunity for social interactions by training animals to tolerate closer proximity to one another and to interact in non-aggressive ways. In gentle touch training, animals are taught the concept of touching an inanimate object like a target “gently”. With that concept understood, the training can move on to an animal touching another animal in the same gentle manner. The hypothesis is that a gentle approach by a dominant animal is less likely to provoke submission and fear in a subdominant animal, which can result in fleeing and subsequent chasing and aggression. Gentle touch training can also be useful during introductions to slow down a dominant animal’s approach.

Proximity training involves reinforcing animals for decreased proximity to one another. As they tolerate closer proximity to one another, fear in subdominant animals and aggression in dominant animals are simultaneously reduced. This then provides the context for positive social interactions to occur.

Targeting is the technique used to elicit the physical proximity as well as the gentle touch. By combining these two behaviors, animals are reinforced for being closer together and then touching each other gently. As these behaviors become more comfortable for both animals, they can lead to other natural affiliative behaviors and more positive social interactions, up to and including reproductive behaviors. This training has been documented with a group of drills (Cox, 1989) and data demonstrated that positive changes to the social behavior of the group persisted beyond the actual training project.

Collaborative Training involves training animals to work together to complete a specific behavior. They are then reinforced for completing the behavior together. Behaviors must be designed that facilitate this type of interaction. Examples might include: animals moving together from one place to another, passing objects from one animal to another, etc.