

Clipping Picasso's Toenails: An Odyssey

By Pam Price



Picasso sits calmly for a nail trim. Photo credit: Pam Price

Picasso, my young, healthy Scarlet Macaw used to go regularly to the veterinarian for a routine nail clipping until one of those sessions resulted in a near death experience. Wrapped in a towel, he screamed and struggled, as the veterinarian clipped away at his bleeding toenails, and dabbed them with styptic. As I watched, Picasso's body went limp, his eyes went dim and rolled back into his head, and he stopped screaming. Before I could say a word, the veterinarian threw him on the examining table, and quickly resuscitated him by pressing repeatedly on his little chest. It's difficult to describe my fear and feelings of helplessness as I watched him wilt before my eyes, and then later to hold his weakened body in my arms. He was unable to stand or grasp anything with his feet for over an hour. His breathing was labored and he honked with every exhale. It was this one chilling experience that convinced me that no matter how hard it would be, and how long it would take us to do it, Picasso and I would have to learn to trust each other enough to do this job ourselves. I didn't realize at the time that my relationship with him would move to another level as we achieved this goal.

At the beginning, he was understandably terrified of the clippers. He lunged at me, and bit whole heartedly when I got near him with them. The holes in the rubber-coated handles of the clippers are testimony to this experience. My own wounds have long since healed. It was easy to see that this lesson would go nowhere if we didn't somehow reduce his fear of the clippers. I also felt that if he would voluntarily offer his foot to me, the nail clipping could be his choice. Easy! Right? Well, success did not happen overnight, nor in days or weeks. It took months of steady work with him. But, we reached our goal!

This is the plan I followed:

Behavior 1 Goal: To Offer his Foot to me on Cue

1. The closest behavior he already could do was to let me touch his feet and massage them while he gripped the perch. We started reinforcing this initial behavior with lots of praise and additional foot/toe massages.
2. Each of the following successive approximations to the final desired behavior was reinforced in the same way, with the addition of foot/toe kisses when he permitted it. As is done in shaping techniques, we didn't move to the next approximation on the list until the current one had been well learned. Learned approximations were no longer reinforced. Well after having learned this behavior, Picasso and I still practice it on its own in order to maintain that trust of offering his foot to me.
 1. Let me touch one foot
 2. Let me lift one toe.
 3. Let me lift a second toe.
 4. Let me lift a third toe.
 5. Let me lift his fourth toe.
 6. Let me lift his foot (while I say "Give me your foot")
 7. Shift his weight to one foot when I hold out my hand and say, "Give me your foot"
 8. Start to raise one foot when I hold out my hand and say, "Give me your foot"
 9. Raise foot higher when I hold out my hand and say, "Give me your foot"
 10. Actually hold his foot up for me to take it when I extend my hand and say "Give me your foot."



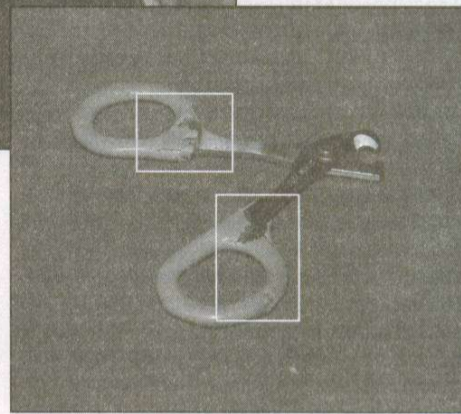
Pam and Picasso. Photo credit: Pam Price

Behavior 2 Goal: To Take the Clippers in his Beak and Play with them.

1. The closest behavior he already could do toward this goal was to view the clippers from 9 feet away without flinching, backing away, or lunging. We started reinforcing this initial behavior with lots of praise and a sunflower seed.
2. Each of the following successive approximations to the final desired behavior was reinforced in the same way. As is done in shaping techniques, we didn't move to the next approximation on the list until the current one had been well learned. Learned approximations were no longer reinforced.
 1. Any movement of the clippers progressively closer to him without his flinching or backing away, until the clippers are within his reach.
 2. Does not flinch when clippers are held out in front of him
 3. Takes clippers from my hand in his beak.
 4. Takes clippers from my hand in his beak and plays with them (as if they were a toy).

Behavior 3 Goal: To Allow me to Clip his Toenails

1. The closest behaviors he already could do were the



Nail clippers. Photo credit: Pam Price

two behaviors I had previously taught him: To offer his foot on cue; and play with the clippers. We started reinforcing the foot offering behavior with lots of praise and foot kisses.

2. Each of the following successive approximations to the final desired behavior was reinforced in the same way. As usual, we didn't move to the next approximation on the list until the current one had been well learned. Learned approximations were no longer reinforced. It is important to note that when clipping was done, I only removed a very, very small portion of his toenail (less than 1/16 of an inch) for fear of hurting him and losing the trust we were building. Any action that would serve to remind him of his previous bad experience would only set us back.