

Chimpanzees Trained to Cooperate with Animal Care

Mollie A. Bloomsmith, Ph.D.

At the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center's chimpanzee housing facility in Bastrop Texas, chimpanzees have been trained to cooperate with a wide variety of animal care procedures by relying exclusively on positive reinforcement techniques. We believe the training program has improved the efficiency of the animal care staff, reduced the stress associated with some common animal care processes, and provided a challenging activity for the chimps to be involved in.

Many of the chimpanzees will reliably provide a urine sample on cue, and will present various parts of their bodies for examination, such as showing a wounded finger for treatment or opening his/her mouth to allow inspection of the teeth and throat. Many of the chimps also cooperate with receiving a hypodermic injection. With the construction of a "blood collection sleeve" a few chimps have been taught to safely have a blood sample drawn while fully conscious. The veterinary treatment of a young diabetic chimp has been greatly improved by utilizing positive reinforcement training.

The chimpanzees reliably respond to a verbal stimulus to come to the inside portion of their enclosures, and voluntarily enter a transport cage so they can be moved from one enclosure to another.



Positive reinforcement techniques have been applied to solve the problem of excessive competition over food that occurs in some chimp groups. The offending animals have been trained to sit in one location while the entire group is fed, overcoming the problem of aggression during meals.

Some behaviors have been trained to facilitate cooperation with the training process itself, such as "come" and "sit." A few chimpanzees have been trained to return objects to the trainer which allows them to handle objects that they cannot keep for long periods. Training is now being applied to increase the amount of physical exercise some chimps engage in as part of a weight-reduction program.



At this facility training is being objectively evaluated to determine the amount of time required to reach targeted levels of performance, to compare different training techniques, to measure the effects of training on the social dynamics of the chimps, and to study training as a form of environmental enhancement.

This training program has been orchestrated by Michale E. Keeling, D.V.M., and has involved a strong collaboration with Gail Laule and Tim Desmond from the consulting firm, Active Environments. Financial support has been from the National Center for Research Resources, The National Institutes of Health. Other facilities have similar chimpanzee training programs, such as the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in San Antonio, Texas.

Related Publications

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