

Health and Safety Considerations

As, zoos and aquariums increasingly rely on the ability of animals to actively participate in their care, animal care professionals are charged with increasing their technical knowledge of animal training. Many animals can benefit from a well organized training program. With this, consideration must be given to the health and safety of the animals and care-givers taking part in the training sessions.

Assuming the animal in mind is suited for participation in a training program, the health of the animal is a primary consideration. The age, current medical status, nutritional needs, as well as disposition and social dynamics of the animal, all should be considered during the planning stages.

Also a consideration, is safety. The area the training will take place should be safe for both animal and trainer. The mechanical features (doors, crates, mesh barriers, etc.) should all be evaluated for safety with respect to the planned activities. Also, the tools that will be used, the mode of delivering reinforcement, and procedures planned should be evaluated for safety. Common sense and experience can help to prevent potential problems. Below is a checklist of questions that should be considered to ensure the safety of a training program.

HEALTH CHECKLIST

- Are there any disabilities that might hinder the animal's ability participate?
- Dietary concerns may include: food allergies, dental health, desired weight, or the development of treat preference over daily diet.
- Will withholding a food reinforcer during a session adversely affect the animal's health?
- Are there any current or future medical concerns relative to the activity planned?

SAFETY CHECKLIST

- Is the training area safe for staff and animals: doors, gates, and latches working properly?
- Are the mesh & bars the appropriate size and shape to prevent injury to the trainer or animal? If not, can a smaller sized mesh be attached to the training area?
- If the animal is managed in a 'free contact' method, will the training program develop imprinting that could pose a safety threat to the keeper? (e.g.: male hooved stock or male ostrich that could become aggressive may be more of a danger to humans if natural flight distance is modified). Is there a way to accomplish the goals without developing too much trust?
- Will the development of a training relationship with a human interfere with the natural social interactions with conspecifics (i.e.: imprinting).
- Are the tools safe? If the animal can get the training tool, can the animal ingest the object or pieces of it? If they can be ingested, can it choke the animal or cause an intestinal blockage? Is any part of the tool toxic, including paint or epoxy? Are the tools disinfected properly after each training session?

- If your bridge is on a lanyard, can the animal grab it causing you harm? There are break-away lanyards available.
- Consider the social dynamics of species when animals are being separated from their conspecifics: Does separation increase aggression? If you are unable to separate the animals, will this increase the aggression from the animals not involved in the session. Can stationing be used to occupy those not involved in the session?
- Does training cause abnormally high stress levels? What can be done to reduce this?
- When reinforcing the animals are you reinforcing aggressive or undesirable behaviors?
- Are leashes or creances strong enough to prevent escape? Is the leash or creance training conducted far enough from trees, etc, to prevent entanglement with the lead?
- Are radio transmitters securely attached, functioning properly with fully charged batteries?
- Is an escape or 'fly-away' protocol in place for the species that is being trained in a free flight method?
- Is the trainer adequately experienced to handle potential aggression? If not, a backup trainer should be present during sessions until the new trainer is experienced enough to safely handle any aggression that may occur. Have training methods for curbing aggression been determined in advance to ensure consistency?

Each training program is unique with its own health and safety concerns for the animals and staff involved. It is important to always look for potential problems so that undesirable situations can be avoided. Use of the above list can help to guide care-takers in the development of a new program. The questions do not address every possible scenario; however, they can aid in promoting the health and safety of the animals and staff.