

Safety During Training

Danica Wolfe, Keeper II Mammals, Zoo Atlanta

Training, as a tool to positively address the welfare of animals under human care, is receiving increased focus and attention as a part of zoo keepers' daily responsibilities. Regardless of the behavior, training is a complex task with multiple factors at play – creating opportunities for potential safety risks to go unnoticed and unaddressed. Safety for animals and staff is crucial at all times, especially during training sessions, and assessing risk factors continuously can reduce the rate of injuries or any potential emergencies that may emerge. Identifying and eliminating safety concerns saves time, resources, and creates an environment that is more productive for both trainers and animals alike.

Factoring Safety into Training

Training methods and philosophies may vary between institutions but having previously established safety requirements for training work is always beneficial. It is always important to follow these guidelines and requirements as established by certified and designated animal care and safety staff. Establishing these guidelines saves time by eliminating repetitive discussions about baseline safety requirements each time a novel behavior is trained. These safety protocols allow the trainer to create a more dynamic training environment and empowers them to respond quickly and appropriately to the animal's behavior as it arises. Having set safety requirements allows the remainder of the communication between staff to focus on the importance of the behavior and how it will be trained.

The primary motive behind safety during training sessions is to prevent injury to all trainers and animals involved, but the benefits do not end there. Safety considerations provide additional layers of injury and risk prevention for guests, facility staff, and animals not directly involved in the immediate session. Other benefits include reduced risk of animal escape during training, the ability to safely train animals for public demonstrations or interactions, and the opportunity to increase animal welfare. Zoo keepers can eliminate potential stressors or conditions that may create an environment in which the animal exhibits behaviors of discomfort. While some external factors are unavoidable (i.e. weather and crowd noise), keepers can identify stimuli or actions that act as stressors and adjust the session accordingly. The adjusted environment, and therefore more calm animals, can increase the productivity of the session in a way which is safe for everyone.

Photo 1: Free-flighted bird shows and other guest immersion programs are excellent ways to connect visitors to wildlife. Always consider animal behavior and environmental factors to ensure safety throughout the encounter. (Photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta)



Who Should Make Safety During Training a Priority?

To keep things simple, everyone involved in training should keep safety at the forefront of their minds. It doesn't matter if the animal is considered domestic or dangerous, safety is applicable across all species. Situations can escalate quickly, and animals not considered dangerous can exhibit dangerous behaviors under certain circumstances. By considering safety equally, regardless of the animal, trainers decrease the risk of accidents. An accident, irrespective of the severity, can make all the difference between a behavior being deemed "too risky" or "not safe" for a zoo keeper to train.

Those who take on the role of primary trainer when training novel and



Photo 2: The position of the trainer is important in protected and free-contact settings. Be cognizant of the animal's ability to access the trainer or training instruments used during a session. (Photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta)

established behaviors should consider all safety risk factors involved with the behavior, the animal involved in the session, and what can be done to decrease or predict any risks prior to training. Consulting with managers and other zoo keepers who work with the animal ensures that facility guidelines are being met and provides the opportunity to identify risks that may have been overlooked initially. Training new behaviors can be an exciting and challenging process and discussing with coworkers is a great team building opportunity and learning experience for everyone.

It is also important to remember that not all those who are involved in training sessions are those who work with the animal every day. Consider the interaction level each person involved has with the animal being trained (or their animal experience in general) and the safety precautions necessary for them to effectively execute their role. For instance, veterinary staff are properly trained and certified to perform the medical portion of the behavior (i.e. blood draws and ultrasounds), which is where their focus will be. These procedures usually mean an increased number of people in animal buildings and spaces, so zoo keepers should assess how a building is set up and where people can observe or participate from safely.

Communication is key in these situations and staff who are appropriately trained to work with the animal on that behavior should communicate to veterinary staff how to proceed safely with the session in response to the physical environment and animal's behavior in the moment. Additional considerations include building exits, where emergency equipment is stored, and constantly acknowledging human position in relation to the animal during the session. It is also important to identify where other animals in the building are located, particularly when training an animal which is sharing a space or in an adjacent space. Knowing the individual behavior of the animal involved in the training session can also be a key safety tool and it should be acknowledged and discussed if there are any concerns that may affect the safety level of the session. This can include aversions the animal may have to sounds medical equipment makes, the presentation of a needle, etc.

In some cases, animal care teams and veterinary staff are not always the only ones to frequently handle or interact with animals in their care. For facilities with volunteers or education outreach staff that regularly handle animals, whether it be for husbandry purposes or guest interactions, it is important to keep all handlers up to date on proper safety techniques. An efficient way

to do so is to provide up-to-date fact sheets on all individual animals being handled. These sheets can include the species' anatomical capabilities, such as a raptor's grip strength, as well as any behavioral changes, dispositions, or medical conditions that may affect how the animal may reasonably respond to any stimuli and is subsequently handled. This should be done by someone who is properly trained or certified to do so as designated by the institution and can be an effective safety tool for volunteers as well as paid staff.

General Steps to Take to Ensure a Safe Training Session

Once the safety requirements of the behavior have been identified, there are additional steps zoo keepers can take to ensure a safe training session for everyone.

Gathering Equipment Before Starting a Session

Gathering all equipment needed for the session before it starts not only saves time, but it also keeps focus on the training being conducted and safety measures already put into place. Having all tools prepared and ready in the area where the training will be conducted eliminates having to make trips back and forth, securing or un-securing doors to get to the equipment needed, and the added potential for distraction. Gathering bridging tools, reinforcement, target poles, etc. beforehand leaves the trainer's full attention on the session, the animal, and the behavior being trained. Training sessions are already complex tasks and taking this extra step of preparation beforehand eliminates an avoidable distraction.

Properly Using the Equipment Involved in a Training Session

If equipment is being used during a training session, it is important that trainers and other staff involved know how to handle it properly. This is especially critical for medical equipment such as blunt needles or blood pressure cuffs and is also important for something as simple as a wooden dowel or target stick. Does the animal have the capability to push the tool back towards the trainer and injure them? Is there a way that the trainer can position their body to



Photo 3: During all training, whether it be protected or free-contact, it is important to know your exit routes as well individual animal behavior. Having a plan and recognizing behavioral cues both prevent safety from being compromised. (Photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta)

eliminate that risk? Or is the behavior being trained in a way that the animal can't gain possession of the tool and injure itself or conspecifics in the same area? These may be simple questions to ask, but they are easily identified precautions that could potentially cause trainer or animal injury if not addressed. Only those who are certified or trained to handle medical equipment should do so. This person may vary depending on the facility, but it is important that proper and safe handling is exercised. Likewise, it is good practice to treat prop items (i.e. blunt needles) like the real item. This includes proper handling, storage, and disposal. Also, despite their lack of functionality as an actual piece of medical equipment, props should be very clearly labeled as such in a way that is easy and clear to see. While writing "prop" on a medical training object (or designating it as such according to a standard and universally recognized labeling protocol) might not seem like a necessary precaution, incorrect labeling and storage can create a large problem in emergency situations when decisions need to be made quickly.

Communication is (Always) a Strong Safety Tool

Communication is important in all aspects of the animal care field and crucial to safe training sessions. One

of the easiest steps to take to help ensure a safe training session for everyone is to alert others in the area that a training session is going to occur. This is particularly true in situations where shifting or perimeter doors will be opened - creating risk for animal escape during the session. In areas where multiple staff members are working independently, the opportunity for distraction as a safety risk is high. A distracted animal, at best, may simply result in loss of attention. At worst, it could spook an animal resulting in injury to itself, conspecifics or staff due to flight response. A simple radio transmission, telephone call, or verbal communication to others that are in or may enter the area helps decrease those risks.

In situations that involve frequent opening and closing of transfer or shift doors, additional safety precautions as part of shifting protocol must be observed. In addition to alerting coworkers that a training session is about to occur, ensure that perimeter doors are secure. This eliminates having to radio a coworker each time a transfer or shift door is opening or an animal is moving from place to place in a dangerous animal area. Another communication tool includes easily mounted signage readily

available in all animal areas that can be displayed to indicate a training session is taking place. The signs can be short and simple, such as "Training in Progress" or "Radio (insert animal here) zoo keeper before entry" and placed on security doors into the area. This is a friendly reminder to coworkers to exercise caution and communicate that the space is indeed safe to enter. This can be especially useful in complex buildings with multi-use spaces. It can be habit to get into a routine of how each day typically goes and the reminder from a sign may make all the difference in keeping a safety error from occurring. Standard communication protocol allows trainers to maintain focus on the session and the behavior being trained, and reduces risks of animals having access to areas they shouldn't or breaching containment barriers.

Guest Programs and Interactions

For many zoological facilities, guest interactions, demonstrations, and immersion programs are a useful tool to engage and inspire visitors. For these programs to be effective and maintain the highest standards of animal welfare, they must be executed safely. For example, during free-flighted bird shows, what are the requirements for the birds to be able to safely leave their primary containment areas? Consider the temperature, current weather, and the weather forecast during the duration of the show or interaction. Unfavorable conditions may not be safe for the birds, trainers, or guests involved in the case of a fly-off or distraction during the show.

When handling program animals or involving animals in up-close encounters, it is also important to remember that crowds cycle. Make sure to reiterate the rules of interacting with the animal every few minutes and demonstrate the proper and safe way to do so. With large crowds, or during public training demonstrations, it may not be possible for one person to pay full attention to the animal while also interacting with guests. More often than not, there is extensive benefit to have multiple trained staff members present; the number necessary to focus



Photo 4: Animals of all sizes can become dangerous under certain circumstances. Assess and establish safety parameters for all animals prior to beginning a session. (Photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta)

exclusively on the animal and others to safely manage and effectively educate guests. This allows for full attention on the animal from the trainer(s) and leaves the opportunity for the other(s) to talk about safely interacting with the animal or answering any questions guests may have. In any situation where guests are closely interacting with animals, with or without a protective barrier, the safety requirements for doing so need to be clearly and concisely communicated by trained staff.

Context Matters: Understanding the Animal and its Environment

Analyzing how to safely train in each environment is an important tool for all animal care professionals.

Think about the animal being worked with, both as a species and as an individual. Animals that tend to be more affected by sudden changes in their surroundings are particularly important to consider. For example, in situations involving prey animals such as hoofstock, where the animal can easily spook, standing position and proximity to extremities can be very dangerous. There will always be external stimuli outside the zoo keeper's control. For instance, flying objects overhead may

trigger a flight response and the proper positioning of the trainer and animal can make all the difference in preventing injury to the trainer, the animal, or any of its conspecifics.

Furthermore, a barrier is not an automatic safety blanket and the possibility for injury to trainer or animal is always there. Once again, knowing the capability of the animal being worked with is critical. Can the animal pass the plane of the barrier with any portion of its body? If so, is the trainer's body positioned in such a way

that they will not be harmed in the case that this occurs? Being aware of general body placement in these situations is important because a simple shift in weight by the trainer could put hair, lanyards, uniform sleeves, etc. within reach.

Also assess if the animal has the capability to compromise its own safety while being asked for certain behaviors. For example, when training an open mouth behavior, an animal might hook its tooth on the barrier, putting itself and the trainer at risk of injury while attempts are made to unhook it. Always keep animal and trainer safety in mind and brainstorm with team members and managers on how to not reinforce behaviors that compromise safety.

Conclusion

The ability to incorporate safety into training is a handy tool for all animal care professionals to have. To reach individual and team goals set for animals in human care, zoo keepers should always take the necessary steps to ensure safety for all involved during a training session. A safe work environment is a productive work environment not just for zoo keepers, but for all staff, guests, and animals at a facility. Furthermore, it empowers zoo keepers to respond effectively in the moment and expands the possibilities for future training work. 🐘

