

Talking to Animals in Your Care: A Discussion on LAREF

Discussion Participants

Genevieve Andrews-Kelly (Genny), Meagan McCallum (Megs), Evelyn Skoumbourdis, Thomas Ferrell (Tom), Harriet Hoffman, Jeannine Cason Rodgers, Renee Gainer, Kaile Bennett, Meagan L. Shetler, David W. Cawston, Polly Schultz, J.B. Barley (Jas), Kayla Shayne, Jacqueline Schwartz, Natasha Down, Russell Yothers, Autumn Sorrells, Lynette Chave, Viktor Reinhardt

Erik Moreau, *Moderator*

I had discussions with some Trainers who emphasized the importance of talking to your animals while they acclimate to a new environment and handling procedures, and, once the acclimation period is completed, to continue having “conversations” with the animals.

Do you talk to your animals? If you do, what species are you working with? Do you find it is making a difference when you talk to your animals on a regular basis?

—Erik



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I definitely talk to all my animals: dogs, macaques, rabbits, swine and rodents. When I train new employees, I always encourage them to talk to the animals in their charge. Every time we are in an animal room, there is communication happening between us and our animals. More than just through words, we are communicating emotionally and with our body language. These friendly “conversations” set and maintain a positive tone when we are with our animals. The conversations with my animals are highlights of my day!

—Genny

In my current position, I mostly work with and talk to dogs and rats. I do, however, have years of previous experience working with and talking with cynomolgus macaques, rabbits, guinea pigs and mice. Whenever I am around my animals, I talk about random things just so they can hear my voice. I always talk in what I feel are calm and soothing tones, which I do think really helps the animals to be at ease when I am with them. Talking and sometimes singing to the animals makes me feel relaxed and calm which, I assume, projects into the room at large and creates good vibes for all.—Megs



Photo by Annie Reinhardt

I talk to all animals with whom I work—including the rodents. When entering an animal room, I will greet everybody with “Hi guys/gals, Greetings meece, Afternoon ladies/gents,” etc. Not all animals are able to see the door, and not all animals have keen eyesight. Thus, I feel my vocal welcome lets all animals in the room know that someone has entered. I know it does something positive because the animals’ body language shows me they are not alarmed or afraid when I have entered. I will then speak to them as I walk around the room and while I work with individual animals or groups of animals. It’s just something I’ve always done. It sometimes happens that I have extended conversations with the larger animals, and I get responses from rabbits, dogs, monkeys and swine. Occasionally I’ll sing. I’m not very good at it, but some of the monkeys and swine I am working with really respond nicely to it. Perhaps they like things off key?! Talking (and singing) to the animals in my charge makes them familiar with me and probably helps them understand I mean no harm to them.—*Evelyn*

Not only do I talk to all the animals in my charge but, on occasion, also sing to them. I tell the staff that the rodents are really good listeners and don’t mind the terrible singing! —*Renee*

Singing may not always be the best form of communication. I had an aged mare who could hear very little, but on me starting up singing in the stables, she would consistently run away—even from her food. I also had a cat who showed the very same reaction, though perhaps this says more about my singing than anything else! —*Lynette*

The vervet monkeys I am training seem to like it when I sing. When they hear “In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight: oweemaway, oweemaway ...” they all come right up to the front of the cages and look at me: “YAY! The crazy lady with the ‘clicker game’ (what I imagine they think of positive reinforcement training) is here!” It’s always amusing to see their excited faces.—*Jeannine*

I am not a good singer, so I also only talk to the animals in my charge, regardless of species. I very much agree that it benefits not only the animals but also myself; it makes the animals relaxed in my presence and it makes me happy to be with them. Besides talking to my pets at home, I was first introduced to the importance of talking to animals when I volunteered at a University swine complex. The Manager had such a great rapport with his pigs! Every room he walked into, he greeted the pigs.

At that time, I did not understand why he called them all “Birds.” I have a better appreciation now as I too will call my animals some pretty silly things.—*Erik*

Whenever I walk into their room, I talk to my critters—especially large animals—and continue talking to them while I am with them. IMHO, not the words as much as the tone of my voice serves to keep things level, myself included. Even if I’m only talking to myself, I crack myself up sometimes. —*Tom*

I agree with you 100%! Talking to the animals in a happy soothing tone helps in fostering a friendly relationship with them. They do recognize you by your voice or by the sound of your walk or cart you push, even before you enter their room. I work with a colleague who, whenever he walks into a room of monkeys—be it in the morning, at lunch or in the late afternoon—greet the animals with “Good morning.” This is usually a higher pitch and it sounds the same every time. Always cracks me up, but the monkeys know who he is by gosh, just by those words, or is it just by the sound of those words? I talk to all the animals in our facility. Sometimes I find myself singing and dancing in a non-human primate room, and

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I do believe the monkeys look at me like I am crazy; I just tell them "come on dance with me." Hahaha, maybe I am!
—*Harriet*

Talk, sing, dance! Nothing better than a captive audience—LOL.—*Jeannine*

Totally Agree!!!—*Harriet*

Walking into a monkey room, a pig room, a rabbit room or a rodent room, I also greet everyone with "Hello" or "Good morning." I believe this is a kind of courtesy, letting the animals know who is about to enter. They will not be frightened as they already know that a completely harmless and trustworthy human is coming.—*Renee*

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When acclimating new macaques while they're in quarantine, I spend some time each day sitting near their cages and read to them. This gives me something to say and allows me to avert my eyes naturally so they get comfortable with me. I have the impression that the reading lets them get used to conversational tones in my voice. Usually, I give them something to snack on during these visits to associate my voice with favored treats. Later, when the animals are on behavioral studies, I am talking to them all the time, saying positive reinforcement/affirmations or explaining what I'm doing or what I'm about to do. They also have nicknames that I use when addressing individual animals.—*Kaile*

Having a good conversation with your animals and humming or singing when you are in their room provides high quality environmental enrichment for both the animals and for you. The vocal contact with your animals is the basic foundation for the development of a trust relationship with them. Your voice is certainly of more value for them than sound emitted from a radio or CD player. When I worked with rhesus and stump-tailed macaques, I always greeted the animals cheerfully when entering their rooms, and I kept vocal contact while visiting them individually. They recognized my voice and knew from their own experience that they could trust me, so they always remained quiet while I was with them, even when I had to give injections or take blood samples.—*Viktor*

Rabbits appear more at ease when I talk or sing a lot, thereby creating a kind of soothing background sound. Pigs love a good conversation, especially when I include some lip-smacks; it's a language they understand! I do talk to rodents, even though we do all our work with them under hoods, so they cannot hear me. When talking to them, it is more for my sake, keeping me in a peaceful state of mind that hopefully affects the rodents in a positive way. Monkeys show with their body language that they like it when

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I chat with them or sing while cleaning their room. Since dogs can learn the meaning of words, talking to them is a very valuable tool for me when I work with them.—*Meagan*

Your comments really sum up what I was about to say. I believe that talking to our animals helps us and helps them. I stopped with my daughter yesterday to see some dairy heifers out on pasture that we drove past. They were very typical cattle, shy but curious and spooky at first. The more we talked to them, the more they settled down. When we left after about 20 minutes, the fence line was full of heifers looking for more attention.—*David*

Speaking to the macaques in my care fosters trust and friendship relationships with



Photo by David W. Cawston

them! It helps them understand my intentions, and when they respond in their macaque-way, that helps me understand what's going on their heads. No need for an interpreter (:-) —*Polly*

Rather than talking, I start hooting whenever I'm approaching a room of our macaques; just to let them know I'm coming. They always hoot back—and the husbandry techs always laugh at me :o) —*Jeannine*

I think communicating with animals in their own language is even better than talking to them in human language which they don't understand, albeit probably "feel" its meaning. —*Viktor*

When I am with the macaques, I can't even tell you how often I hoot, grunt, lip-smack and make the curious humming sound without even being aware of it. This "monkey talk" may sound pretty silly to an outsider, but I can tell you, it connects me deeply with these creatures who depend on my proper understanding of their needs, wishes, pains and frustrations.—*Polly*

The hooting has also become a kind of background communication with my macaques. I once casually hooted while leading an inspection team

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Photo by Stan Hiatt



in the room when one of my boys was begging for a treat; Whoops!—*Kaile*

A happy lip-smack conversation with macaques—especially cynos—has always been a highlight for me! I've also had the good fortune to converse with pigtailed—humming while presenting a duckbill face—and with baboons, the happiest grunters on Earth.—*Evelyn*

I often wonder if non-human primates sometimes misunderstand us when we wear the obligatory face mask/goggles. Lip-smacking is a “vocabulary” I very often use when communicating with our macaques. I do realize that they can't see my puckered lips—a facial expression that is part of the macaque-typical lip-smacking—yet I do it anyway.—*Kaile*

The monkeys do hear when you smack your lips, and they can also see the movement of the mask while you do the lip-smacking gesture. I think these signs are enough for them to understand your message. Many of my macaques lip-smack back in typical macaque fashion when I lip-smack in front of them, irrespective of the fact that I wear a facial mask.—*Harriet*

I talk to all my animals, primarily rodents and rabbits, but also farm animals, birds and amphibia, even though I've yet to see any response from the latter. All the warm-blooded animals appear to recognize my voice. When they hear me, they will come forward to the front of their cage/pen, knowing that I always come with good intentions—if not with favored treats. Pigs will always “talk” back when I address them.—*Jas*

I keep a conversation going with all my animals—mice, dogs, fish and reptiles. As such, they know all my secrets, so I hope they never learn to talk. It's probably anthropomorphism, but sharing my thoughts and emotions with them feels like it may be therapeutic for all of us.—*Kayla*



Photo by Kayla Shayne

It is possible that some animals do not actually hear us when we talk to them because the sound of a typical human voice is not within their hearing range. This may apply to rodents, but perhaps also to large animals such as pigs; so when we are talking to these animals, we may as well just be talking to ourselves!—*Russell*

That is a good observation. I wonder, though, if such an animal doesn't pick up the energy that is created by the human voice—without actually hearing the voice with his/her ear drums—and feels/

decodes the quality of that energy in some way. It doesn't really matter if animals can hear us anyway as they don't speak our language, but they can most likely feel the positive or negative energy that accompanies the vibration of our voice.—*Autumn*

I agree, it's all about the energy that we project. I suppose the talking or singing helps us in projecting the energy that is created by our positive or negative intentions and emotions. The "whisperer" in us all does not require actual audible speech. All of that aside, don't get me wrong, I talk to my animals every day— sometimes in my language, and sometimes in theirs!—*Russell*

The words that we speak/sing in the presence of animals carry our emotional energy; it is the emotional quality of this energy that the animals can understand. There is no cheating possible! You can tell an animal (or a little kid) nice things, but when these words do not correspond with your true intentions, the animal will not "believe"/trust you. I find it amazing how animals (and little kids) can "read our minds" or, perhaps more correctly, "read our hearts."—*Viktor*

When I enter their room and say "Good morning," all the rats and all the guinea pigs in

my charge come to the front of their cages without fail; they have learned to recognize my voice, as I am talking most of the time when I am with them. The guinea pigs get particularly excited, as my voice is a signal for them that they are going to get the hay they love so much.—*Jacqueline*

It seems to me that talking to another creature with whom we interact frequently is a spontaneous response. I have worked with a principal investigator who talked to rats before, during and after he did experimental surgeries with them. The talking may help to stay in a relatively balanced state of mind, even in potentially disturbing situations.—*Viktor*

It is not an uncommon experience for me to come into a room where a researcher is having a chat with his/her mice. Pretty much all our PIs talk to their animals before and during surgery as well as after surgery when the animals are recovering. I think we all see it as essential for the animal who is subjected to a potentially painful and/or distressing situation to know someone they know is around. As with humans, hearing seems to be the last sense that switches off during surgery and the animals always seem to go in and out of anesthesia much calmer when the surgeon is talking to them rather than doing his/her job in silence.

Likewise with euthanasia, we make sure that the last thing an animal hears is the voice of someone they are familiar with.—*Jas*

Being with and talking to animals who know me well is particularly important when they are recovering from surgery in single cages. It seems to me that hearing my voice makes them feel a little bit better, less scared and, especially, less lonely.—*Natasha*

Talking to/with the animals in your care not only provides freely available environmental enrichment but also can serve as a tool. It has been and is my experience that talking reassuringly and compassionately to a highly distressed, seriously injured or seriously handicapped animal has a comforting effect that enables me to examine and treat the animal as needed without triggering a flight response. "It's okay, I want to help you" is a magic phrase that animals in distress seem to understand.—*Viktor*



How Cute Is That?