

The Use of Positive Reinforcement Training to Facilitate Data Collection in a Pig Study

Cindy Evans¹, Tonya Betts¹, Teresa Neubauer¹
(1) Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas

Recently a researcher approached our large animal facility manager about housing nineteen, 2 month old piglets and assisting with data collection. The protocol required that the piglets eat an individually measured high fat/high sugar diet over 12 weeks. The piglets would also need to be weighed once weekly, a duty that previously took 3 - 4 hours because the piglets were carried to the scale until they weighed about 50 lbs. When they were too heavy to carry they were herded, one at a time, to the scale, a procedure that was time-consuming and stressful for both the pigs and the technicians. We were already short-staffed and wondering how we would be able to take care of the piglets and collect the data needed for the study. The use of positive reinforcement training to reduce stress and facilitate voluntary cooperation by laboratory animals is well documented. Knowing that pigs are very intelligent, we decided to train them to step on the platform scale that is down the hall, about 45 feet from their holding room. After identifying a palatable treat that would not interfere with the study, we offered them to the piglets in their runs once daily for two days. For the next two Thursdays, we led each pig down the hall until they reached the scale, while enticing them with a sugar wafer. By the third Thursday we stopped using the sugar wafer and all 19 pigs ran down the hall after the animal care technician and stood on the scale while their weights are recorded. This task is a stress free, positive experience for the pigs and the technicians, as well. All of their weights are now recorded in less than 30 minutes and the fast-growing piglets enjoy their run down the hall and back.