

# Positive Reinforcement Training



This lesson is inspired by Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles.

In this lesson, students will learn about positive reinforcement and how enrichment is important for both chimpanzees and humans.

## What is positive reinforcement training?

- Training is teaching. At Chimp Haven, staff uses training to teach the chimps how to do things that will help us take care of them.
- Choice is very important at Chimp Haven. The chimps always get to choose when they want to participate in training, and when they're done for the day.
- Chimpanzees participate in training for many reasons:
  - Trainers teach the chimpanzees to go outside so they can clean their rooms, and how to go inside so they can clean their habitats.
  - Trainers teach the chimpanzees how to be good neighbors and to share food with each other.
  - Trainers teach the chimpanzees how to use enrichment items or to play with new toys.
  - Have you ever been asked to show your teeth at the dentist or stick out your tongue at the doctor? You were taking part in your own health care! Trainers teach the chimpanzees to do the same. Even to brush their teeth!
- The type of training used at Chimp Haven is called Positive Reinforcement Training (or PRT). Positive Reinforcement Training uses praise and rewards to make training a positive experience for the chimps.
- The goal of PRT is for the chimpanzees to repeat behaviors that will help staff take care of them. For example, we may train the chimps to learn how to show us their hand so that we can ask them to perform this behavior if they have an injury that needs to be cared for.
- In training, a physical cue is given to a chimpanzee when they are asked to do a behavior. For example, if a staff member wants the chimpanzee to show their hand, the staff member will hold out their own hand while saying "hand."



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- Each chimpanzee is unique and training takes patience! Eventually, with lots of practice and praise, the chimpanzee recognizes the cues being shown for different body parts and learns to present those body parts when asked.
- Trainers use lots of tools to help with training:
  - A clicker makes a clicking sound when you press on it. Clickers signal to the chimpanzees that they did something right. The click means “Good job!”
  - Trainers get creative as they work with the different chimp personalities at the sanctuary. Sheena is a deaf chimpanzee, so instead of a click, trainers give her a thumps up when she successfully completes a behavior!
  - Trainers also use sticks and wooden spoons to point to the chimpanzees’ body parts so they learn what body part to present during their veterinary exams.
  - Trainers also have special tools called “targets” that the chimps learn to follow for exercise.
- Trainers teach by rewarding a successful action with something the chimpanzee likes. That’s called a reinforcer.
- Most chimpanzees like food as their reinforcer, but some would rather have a play session or a piece of cloth with fruit scent on it. What reinforcer motivates you?
- At Chimp Haven training is always a positive experience for the chimpanzees, and the chimps always get to choose when they want to participate in training, and when they’re done for the day.



## Training Chimps at Chimp Haven

- All animal care teams participate in the Positive Reinforcement Training program at Chimp Haven.
- Trainers go to classes and read books to learn how to best work with the chimpanzees.
- New trainers start with chimpanzees who have been in the program for a while, and the chimpanzees teach them to be good trainers!
- There are five different skill levels that trainers master, so there is always something new to learn.
- Trainers work with mentors in the program to develop their skills.



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- Trainers and chimpanzees form relationships, which makes training for both the human and chimpanzee a more enjoyable experience!
- The training program always gives the chimpanzees the freedom to choose – if the chimpanzees don't want to participate in training they don't have to.
- Each chimpanzee is treated as an individual in both their daily care and in their training needs.
- What is something that you've recently learned to do? Tie your shoes? Read a long word? Think about how you learned and then ask a friend how they learned! See if you can find the similarities and differences that make you both unique.
- Just like the trainers, the chimpanzees take time to learn. Training Program Coordinator Rebekah is working with Harvey on how to give objects back to staff. Harvey will readily give her objects—his only condition is that he must break the object in half first!
- Chimpanzees are trained inside their bedrooms and outside in their habitats.
- Training happens at different times throughout day.

## What is Chimp Haven?

- Chimp Haven is a big sanctuary where chimpanzees live together in family groups, also known as troops.
- Chimp Haven is located in Louisiana.
- More than 300 chimpanzees live at Chimp Haven today!

## How can I help support the training program at Chimp Haven?

- By donating an item from our wish list, you support our training program and more than 300 chimpanzee retirees.  
[Learn more and donate today.](#)



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