

Crime and Punishment: **The reward of attention**

Article by Chloe Long

As degu owners, we all know what antics they get up to, and the trouble they get themselves in. Gnawing all the wooden furniture they can reach, chewing the bottom of the door to try and get out, seemingly climbing up a vertical wall to reach a plant they shouldn't be eating... you know how it goes. What can we do about it? Is it possible to punish your degu? How can we use negative reward without causing pain?

Most people resort to a very human punishment- shouting. Shouting works well between humans, usually the tone of voice shocks the person and the words we use communicate our feelings to make the other person feel bad. The combination of shock and bad feelings in the 'criminal' results in negative reward- the person feels punished and therefore less likely to re-offend.

Wild degus don't get punished. At least, not by the human method, unless it's an angry Chilean farmer shouting at the mob of degus who have just munched their way through his potatoes (ouch!). We have to remember that degus *aren't human*, although we can relate to some of their behaviours and personality it doesn't mean they can completely relate to ours. Degus don't view shouting as a punishment, they don't necessarily relate the loud voice with something they have done wrong. In fact, degus are more likely to see shouting as a *reward* for their action. Although the loudness of your voice may shock your degu at first, repeated shouting quickly becomes habitual to your degu and they don't react to it. Instead, they associate your shouting at them with *attention from you*- a positive reward. So, your degu will in fact be *more likely* to repeat the very action that you want them to stop when you shout at them.

So, how can you punish your degu? Once again, you have to get inside their mind. To a degu, punishment is something negative that happens to them, a displeasing experience. In the wild, examples of such negative experiences may be eating something distasteful, being bitten by another degu, being chased off by another degu, being chased by a predator, being isolated from the group or being injured. As punishments we can use, most of these must be ruled out; being bitten by another degu, for obvious reasons; being chased by a predator, we don't want our degu to associate us with a predator; being chased by another degu, it may confuse the degu/predator situation; being injured, we don't want to cause harm to the degu. This leaves social isolation and distastefulness. Firstly, the action by which your degu is 'being naughty' must be determined; for example door-chewing. In this case, we can also determine the cause of the degu's behaviour. Degus chew wood because it is natural to them; in the wild they eat wood and it helps wear their teeth. It also tastes nice to them, so we have to make it taste unfavourable. This can be achieved by rubbing some non-toxic substance that is distasteful to degus onto areas we don't want to be chewed. Such substances include vinegar and pepper. That should be enough of a negative reward to serve as punishment for the degu, so they now associate chewing that particular thing with punishment. If this is not enough, however, we can resort to the second method of isolation. This should involve immediate action when the degu is committing an 'offence', by which you should give one word only (for example "bad" or "no") in a firm voice without shouting, whilst picking up the degu and quickly putting the offender into its cage, closing it. The cage should be positioned in such a way that the offender can observe you and the other degu(s) playing, but cannot contact them directly. You should now completely ignore the offender, but make a point of playing with the other degu(s). After 5 minutes or so of isolation (any longer than this can have welfare implications), remove the offender and put them back into the group, then continue play as normal. If you proceed to do this every time an 'offence' is committed, using the same word each time, your degu will quickly learn to associate not only that particular action with punishment, but also that word. In future, not only will they be less inclined to re-offend, but use of the 'punishment word' alone will cause them to think twice before climbing up the curtains!

These methods are by no means degu-proof, but are far more likely to work than any other, more human response. By all means give it a go before you start tearing your hair out, but remember that punishment should only be used in the mildest sense of the word, and there is a fine line between discipline and cruelty. Please use your best judgement and don't be too hard on the little guys, you can never be sure of the limit to their understanding.