

# PSYCHOSOCIALIZATION OF THE GREEN IGUANA: HOW TO BETTER HANDLE YOUR PET

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**A**n animal kept in captivity who is never reconciled to its condition lives in a continual state of stress. An iguana who is never tamed and socialized becomes stressed each time it sees or is forced into contact with the main object of stress—humans.

An untamed iguana is no fun to interact with and a vicious cycle is established, with the iguana running away and scratching, lashing and even nipping or biting whenever it is caught. As most owners of untame iguanas cannot hold onto them long enough to trim their nails, they either stop trying to hold the iguana or resort to using enormous, or enormously thick, gloves which not only scares the iguana even more, but can cause injury as they are often too thick to be able to accurately gauge the pressure being put on iguana bones. When the iguana has a calcium deficiency, broken bones are all too common. As most vets prescribe complete inactivity and the removal of all cage furnishings during the recovery period, an already barely tamed iguana becomes totally wild and takes longer to heal due to the lack of weight-bearing activity.

Most of the calls I get, and house calls I make, are related to untamed iguanas. Most of the iguanas I am given are wild; at best, they are barely tolerant of very short episodes of human contact. The reason most often cited for getting rid of iguanas two or more years of age is that they are difficult or “impossible” to deal with or the owners start to feel guilty for leaving it locked in a cage day after day while it glares out at them every time they walk by.

It is not an impossible task to tame and socialize iguanas. It does take time, it will involve the loss of some skin (yours) and some sleepless nights (yours) and some occasional despairing thoughts (yours). On the flip side, there will be increased mental and physical health (yours and

the iguana’s), increased interest in its surroundings (the iguana’s), and an opportunity to teach your children and others how to interact and get to know another living creature.

## Iguana Psych 101

### The Pavlovian Training of Humans

In the wild, iguanas are somewhat social animals. They are found in groups in trees, basking and foraging together. Amongst herbivores there is little competition for food when food is plentiful. And as long as there remains forest, there is plenty of food for the iguanas living in the trees. There is, however, competition for prime basking areas and, during different seasons, competition for seasonally available fruits and flowers, and for territory and females during the breeding season. Males are the most competitive, with adult males vying for the alpha position—the best basking perch, the biggest territory, the most females. Females are only occasionally territorial, primarily reacting offensively when they wish to be left alone. Young males who are not yet ready to take on mature males may hang out with dominant males, but are always watchful for signs of aggression. When the dominant male begins territorial and attractant behaviors, most younger males take off for the periphery, avoiding as much as possible the attentions of the dominant males. Young males who have reached sexual maturity but who are not yet able to compete successfully against a bigger male often do not adopt breeding colors, retaining instead their juvenile colors which are essentially those of the females, a survival tactic found in many different species throughout the animal kingdom.

In captivity, the owner and owner’s family are first considered potential predators, later being transforming into competition as the iguana becomes assured that it is not going to be eaten.



Sub-adult green iguana, *Iguana iguana*. Photograph: R.W. Ehrig

When you first bring your iguana home, it reacts like most other small animals who find themselves temporarily at the bottom of the food chain: thrashing, puffing up, lashing its tail, opening its mouth so you can see how pink and dangerous it is and, when that doesn't work, it attempts to run away. When you do manage to pick it up, it whips its tail, scratches, crocodile rolls - in short doing everything possible to get away from you. When it does get away or when you give up trying to get it out of its enclosure, you have taught the iguana that it can make you go away. The next time you go to get it out, it will act up again, often more vigorously than it did before. When you go away yet again or put it down as soon as you get scratched or bit, you will have once again reinforced that behavior.

(Note: if your new iguana does not act like this but lays placidly in its enclosure and barely objects when you pick it up, you have not lucked out by managing to select an already tame iguana. What you have is a sick iguana. Get it to an experienced reptile veterinarian as quickly as possible; if you can, take a fresh fecal sample with you.)

It is at this point that most owners make their biggest mistake. They decide to wait until the iguana calms down; some owners believe that

once the iguana settles in or gets a little older, it will be tame. Not! What they do get is a 5 foot, 10 pound iguana who is just as wild and crazy as when they bought it, only now when it doesn't nip, it bites with a set of very powerful jaws and the whippy tail becomes an armored razor-edged lash. It becomes a frightening prospect to remember that the iguana is still not full-grown.

Some owners or primary caretakers are able to develop a relationship with their iguana, but the rest of the household gets subjected to the same wild behavior. What happens in this situation is that the owner or primary caretaker has not put up with the wild behavior and so has been established as the alpha entity. The iguana then tries and usually succeeds in dominating everyone else. Some owners and families are able to tame their iguana so that it is well behaved with the immediate family but when any outsider to that family unit comes in, even friends of family members who visit frequently, the iguana acts to dominate them.

### Tricks

Iguanas threaten by using a variety of physical behaviors. When not being held, they stand tall with all four limbs extended; they laterally

compress their body to make themselves look even taller; the dewlap swings out to full extension to increase the silhouette-size of their head; the tail twitches and lashes; the open mouth threatens to bite; and “push ups” and bobbing forequarters warn of impending movement. The body is broadside to you to reinforce the illusion of size. When you reach in to pick it up, it may continue to present, may hiss or click-hiss with open mouth, and whip its tail; it is at this point that most people give up.

When held, the iguana may claw with all feet, trying to climb out of your grasp, whip your arm or face with its tail while it rolls around inside your grip (“crocodile rolls”) in the attempt to wriggle free. Open mouth hissing and click-hissing and nipping complete the threatening behavior. Many determinedly untame iguanas become quite adept at snaking their necks around to deliver a painful bite.

These are the behaviors you must not walk away from. When you are holding the iguana in your hands, you should not put it down when they occur, even if you are getting bit and scratched. Sounds easy, but it takes some nerve, patience and perseverance on your part..and a willingness to lose some skin. And blood! (Note: try not to jerk your hand away when you get bit - this will actually make the injury worse than it might otherwise have been.

You can trim their claws before you get into heavy training sessions...of course, you have to get enough control over each toe to hold it still enough to cut off just the tip of the claw...without taking off the entire toe! Used the stubby claw nippers with the half-circles cut out of each “blade” and have an open container of blood stop powder—and a handler—close at hand.

### **Tips and Techniques**

When you reach in to get the iguana out of its enclosure, make sure you are well balanced; it won't do either of you any good if you lose your balance just as you grab the iguana, dropping it before you crash to the floor dragging the Vitalite with you. If the iguana continues to elude you, dodging between the basking branches and hide

box and water bowl, remove as many furnishings as you need to be able to have a clean shot at him, and take away any places he can hide behind. Don't give up. If it is taking longer than you thought it would and you are getting to (or past) the point where you just don't care any more, don't give up! If you do, the iguana will have won that encounter. You will have reinforced the fact that it can indeed make you go away.

If the iguana has gotten out of its enclosure (a polite way of saying that when you finally got him out, you let him get away from you!) and is running around the room or the house, you must get it. It may mean crashing and banging into furniture (you more than the iguana), intruding yourself into that small, dusty place beneath the dresser or behind the bookcase and rearranging the furniture as you move it all to try to get to him, but do it you must.

Once you are finally able to pick him up, hold him for at least a couple of minutes. It must be your decision to put him down, not his. If he gets particularly wild, if he scratches, lashes or bites you, do not put him down. If you do, you will have reinforced the concept that scratching, lashing and biting works. It's pure cause and effect, a concept the iguana can easily understand: he hurts you, you put him down. Yes, you are playing a game of wits and nerves with a little green lizard. It may sound stupid, but it is surprising how many people lose this game!

Let him climb from hand to hand and roll freely within your hands. Talk gently to him, using his name often. Rock back and forth with him. Try holding him in your hand and extending your arm upright over your head. The iguana should settle down and stop writhing around. After a moment or two of calm, slowly bring him down to your eye level. Support his body in both your hands, thumbs under the belly/chest area, his hind legs resting on your forearms, your fingers arched over his back, his face within a few inches of yours. Continue talking softly, using his name. At this point the iguana should settle down for a few moments. The more often you do this, the less preamble (fighting, lifting) you will have to go through and you will both experience longer

periods of calm. The iguana will learn that you won't put it down until it calms down, resulting in an iguana who settles down sooner each time.

Expect regression. You may have gone to bed one night ecstatic about the progress you two have made only to find your iguana's evil twin has moved in over night. Just keep at it. Remember that you are bigger and smarter. Or are supposed to be. Frequently remind yourself of these facts.

### **Integrating Iguanas Into Your Life**

Iguanas are alert, curious and interested in their surroundings, eager to explore new spaces and find great places to bask, sleep and, at least initially, hide. One of the fastest ways to tame your iguana, and the best way to ensure a mentally healthy iguana, is to give it as much time out of its enclosure as you can.

Out time requires a bit of preparation. As with a young child, you must iguana-proof the room or rooms the iguana is going to be allowed access to. This means a bit of time on your back and knees, roll of duct tape in hand, covering up holes and openings under and inside cabinets in the bathroom and kitchen, under appliances, between appliances and cabinets. Assure that all window and door screens are free of rips and holes and are securely fitted. Remove all toxic houseplants.

Three pieces of equipment I find indispensable are a hand mirror, long stick (I use my 5' hickory walking stick or 6' snake hook) and a powerful flashlight. The mirror enables me to look under and behind things without having to get down on the floor; the flashlight is useful when those places are dark (which they usually are!). The stick enables me to encourage a reluctant iguana to come out from behind the bookcase or from smack in the middle of the floor under my king-size bed. (Someone also recommended keeping two strong men armed with screwdrivers around to disassemble the furniture, but these items are more difficult to store when not in use!)

Make sure that the room you are letting the iguana out into is warm enough. It is not necessary to keep the room at 95°F, but you do need to provide a basking area, preferably one several feet (5-6') up above the floor where the iguana can

look out the window. You can make an easy climber for the iguana by wrapping a board in sisal rope or a towel and bracing it against the shelf of the basking area (securely fastened towels, bird ladders and double layers of fish netting also work well).

Show your iguana around the house. Show him where his water and food are, and where the basking area is. They may not remember the first time out, but iguanas do have good memories for interesting things like basking and hiding areas and will eventually settle on two or three favorite places. You may wish to keep the toilet and any closets and boxes you do not want the iguana exploring closed; one of my iguanas has a favorite spot when he wants to be alone - the second shelf of the towel stand over the toilet in my guest bathroom; another prefers the bathtub in my bathroom.

Include your iguana into your daily routine. A plastic hook stuck on the tile wall of your shower with a washcloth securely hanging from it makes a nice place for your baby ig to hang out while you shower. A shoulder is a comfortable perch while you are eating meals, paying bills, working on the computer, doing your homework. Hold your iguana and let it sit with you or explore the couch or chair while you talk on the phone or watch TV.

Expect it to get "lost." As long as it is healthy and nighttime temperatures are within the lower limits of the iguana's required gradient, it will not be the end of the world if it spends the night out of its enclosure. As mentioned above, they begin to frequent the same places over and over again and eventually all you need to do is make the rounds of their favorite spots to make sure they are there and comfortable. Well, safe. I've seen some scrunched up in some pretty funny positions all in the attempt to make themselves invisible.

### **Taking It to the Streets**

Early on you should begin getting you and your iguana used to being outside. This does not mean you stick your iguana on a bush and walk away. Nor does it mean that you pop a leash around its neck and go walking down the street.

It does mean that as you begin to build up trust with your iguana inside the house, you need to begin building up the same trust outside. But, while inside the house you do not have to constantly have your hand on the iguana, outside you need to be in constant contact with the iguana to safeguard against its jumping and taking off.

I do not recommend the use of leashes, especially the so-called "iguana" leashes that are merely ferret and rabbit leashes repackaged with a picture of an iguana. If a collar/leash is on loose enough so that it does not hurt the iguana, it is loose enough so that the iguana can rapidly dorsally and laterally compress itself and wriggle out. If it is on tight enough so that the iguana cannot get out, then it is too tight, and you risk strangling your iguana should he leap off. You will also destroy the dorsal spikes in the area immediately beneath and on either side of the leash. There are new harnesses out now, with a sling-like piece which goes under the iguana's chest and through which his forearms are placed. The same problems occur with this harness as with the figure-eight, except that if the harness is loose enough to not injure the spines, it is on loose enough for the sling to slip and a thrashing iguana to break a leg.

Get the iguana used to the presence and touch of other people, noise and movement. You will eventually find places that welcome you and your iguana, and places that do not. Respect those who do not. Respect local health codes and the owners of restaurants and markets and do not take your iguana inside. Pet stores and nature stores are often great places to introduce your iguana to new people and to do a little educating on your own.

### In Conclusion

Take the time to do it right. Be patient. Just as you spent a great deal of money and time setting up the iguana's tank and strive to provide it with the proper environment and diet, use the same patience to work with your iguana. It will take anywhere from 6-8 months (or longer, depending upon the individual's temperament) to reach the point where your iguana is comfortable in most situations. That is a short period of time, indeed,


when weighed against the potential lifespan of 20+ years.

Be sure to play with the tail when they are young and as they grow. Get them used to it being touched and gently tugged. An iguana who is not freaked when his tail is grabbed is an iguana who is not going to lose it when some untamed little child comes up and yanks on the iguana's tail to get your attention. When you go to grab your ig, place one hand under the pelvis/base of tail area, then slip the other hand under the chest, and scoop it up. This will enable you to pull it out or up out of harms way and lets you swing him easily into a forearm carry (the ig's belly resting on your forearm, legs dangling over each side of your arm, your fore- and middle fingers cradling the neck, tail between your arm and ribs).

Most young children (and this includes many kids up into their early 'teens) do not like being scratched and are generally not the ones who should be primarily responsible for the ig's taming and socializing. Taming iguanas should be a family effort as all members of the family ultimately will be sharing their living space with a strong-willed lizard the size of a medium, albeit low-slung, dog.

Taming older iguanas is not necessarily more difficult than working with youngsters, but some may never become as fully tame—comfortable and secure in all interactions—as do ones tamed early on. But it can be done and there is no reason not to start now to retrain yourself and your iguana.

Iguanas have very individualized personalities, each with their own likes and dislikes. Part of the taming process is to learn what your iguana likes and doesn't like and, as much as possible without compromising the taming and socialization, respect those needs and likes. Though the training and taming time are intense, the rewards great for both you and your iguana.

*Excerpted with permission from the book Green Iguana Care, Feeding and Socialization, by Melissa Kaplan, published 1995 on the Internet (<http://www.sonoma.edu/education/melissa/ig-care2.htm>). This chapter is currently under revision.* 

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Monster on the beach  
on U-Cay, Allan's Cays,  
*Cyclura cyclura inornata*.  
Photograph: Paul Wright