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Setting Boundaries with Companion Parrots
Or "Homey Don't Play That", and Finding What Works for Both of You
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It is no fun to live with birds you are afraid of, who consistently rattle your brains with endless screaming, or who chew up your house. Parrots are wild animals, headstrong, highly intelligent and emotional - the very qualities that can make them fabulous companions can also create challenges. Biting, screaming, ripping things up are natural behaviors at times. We work on setting boundaries with our birds - a hopefully clear set of expectations for both humans and the birds who own us - so that we can keep them safe and enjoy our lives together.

If occasional bites or loud vocalizing are deal breakers, then these are not appropriate pets for you. To work with parrot family birds and to think you will not sometimes get bitten is unrealistic. It is much more difficult to work with biting or screaming if you take it personally and over-react. Keeping a bird locked up in its cage or isolated in a back room is cruel and only serves to create a distrustful neurotic bird.

I have birds of my own, and I also foster and board birds, so I am constantly faced with the need to establish kind but clear rules of behavior allowing all of us to get along. It is common for birds to go through an adjustment period while they learn that when it comes to biting or constant screaming or chewing up the house, when they are with me, "homey don't play that."

Trust and Consistency

TRUST is the cornerstone for everything that follows. Without that, all the rule setting in the world won't get far. Parrot family birds do not respond to punishment or rigidity - they are too smart for that, and it is not the way they think. (See [How to Win a Bird's Trust](#) in the October 2012 Mickaboo Newsletter). CONSISTENCY means birds come to know what to expect, which increases their trust in us.

Biting



We all know that parrot family birds generally bite because they are frustrated that we do not get what they are trying to tell us in any other way. They do not like being bullied or pushed past their safety zone (who does?). Ignore their efforts to communicate discomfort and you risk getting bitten. Some birds are more volatile than others. Getting bitten is no fun, and a bad bite can traumatize the relationship if not handled properly. Little birds cannot do the same amount of physical damage as a bigger bird, but they can bite hard and then hold on and grind, generally on the tenderest part of your hand or finger. Large parrots can send you to the hospital for stitches.

It is critical, if counterintuitive, to react as calmly as you can to a bite. There is a fine line between telling your bird "Ow, you hurt me!" (which they understand and can relate to), and reacting too forcefully. Yelling, throwing, or blaming the bird will only make it worse, because it destroys trust.

- Try to reduce the opportunities for a bite, and increase the opportunities for successful interaction. The idea is to avoid establishing a negative pattern.
- Try not to reach into the cage unnecessarily - this reduces the times that the bird feels invaded by an alien hand that he has to defend against by biting. A cage that can be cleaned and stocked from

outside the cage can be helpful. Reward all positive interactions with praise and a treat. Ignore lunges and other signs of hostility. Be quiet and reassuring to any bird who is afraid.

- You have to read each bird as an individual. Some birds who board with me will draw blood on a hand or arm but will step up on a perch, or the end of a towel. Once I have them up and out I try to find ways to have fun safely - flapping time by swinging on a heavy rope swing, or the end of a towel. I tend to swing the bird 15-20 times, counting the number out loud as they flap, then taking time out for praise and maybe a tiny treat - and skritches and back flips if they will accept them (which they usually do when part of a joyful swing and flap session). Then we go for another round of swing and flap. I often go for 20 or 30 minutes with them like this; it is a lot of fun, they get exercise, and it increases trust because I am not asking the bird to step on a hand or arm (which they do not want to do), and I am not getting bitten because I am keeping their beaks at a safe distance.



- If a bird comes across the floor after me when out of the cage, or tries to attack when coming out of the cage, or on the playground, I tell them "Homey don't play that" and quickly drop a big towel over them, tell them I love them and put them back into the cage for a time out. I am gentle and upbeat, but I make it clear that hostility is just not acceptable. This reduces the opportunity for a bite, and creates a moment to just calm down. They generally get the idea pretty quickly that aggression is not going to work, there is not going to be a big drama reward, and we avoid a negative pattern.



- Some birds are not malicious, but in their exuberance they think that chewing on my neck or ears is a fun game. I disagree because it hurts. If these are birds that are otherwise easy to handle, I have learned that a simple way to protect my neck and ears is to wear a heavy felt dickey (these cover your neck, ears and chest; people wear them in cold weather). The birds don't mind them, and again, it decreases the opportunity for a bite.

Wanting to Wander Around Unsupervised

I like to give birds as much freedom for exercise as is safe, but there is too much that they can get into if they wander on their own. Consistency really is the key here, just consistently putting them back on the playground and then back into their cage if they will not stay put on the playground or with me – every time. Birds can be very destructive, very quickly. They can remodel your woodwork or ingest something toxic in short order. I do not want to worry about a bird chewing on the wrong thing, or getting up on someone else's cage and getting hurt, so this is a necessary health and safety rule.

Extreme Vocalising

In some ways this is the hardest one for me because it can be so annoying. It is difficult not to just yell back.

Birds loudly announce morning and evening, and when they are hungry, thirsty, lonely, scared or bored. My first challenge is to learn their language so that I can tell if the call is about a legitimate need. A clean cage, fresh food and water, fun toys, reasonable attention from their human flock and out of cage time for exercise and stimulation - these are basic needs. Often when they call out they are satisfied with "contact calls" back from us - just a "Hi baby, it's ok, I'm here" can go a long way to reassuring that bird that the flock is safe and nearby.

However, to be successful in our homes, birds also need to learn how to play quietly by themselves (not silently, just quietly), and have confidence that we will be back. If somewhere along the way this bird learned that lots of screaming got him attention, then I have my work cut out for me. Here again, the key is consistency - I will often just cover the front of the cage, the side facing the action, and have no contact with the bird until it is quiet - if I am paying attention, I will be able to walk up to the cage with that bird as

soon as it is quiet, raise the cage cover, and give it lots of praise and a small treat. If excessive vocalizing starts again - I cover the front of the cage and just walk away.

The reason I only cover the front of the cage is that I am not trying to plunge the cage into darkness, but rather just to send a signal that this behavior is not OK and will result in brief isolation from the flock.

My experience is that if I can be consistent with this, and resist the impulse to yell at the bird when it is yelling (thus creating a drama award), the noise level comes down significantly as the bird learns what works and what does not work. It is never a total "fix" - some birds are just more insistent than others - but my goal is to just bring it down to a reasonable level.

Parting Thought

Living with parrots will never be a perfect process - they are much too complex. If biting or screaming is unacceptable to you, but you enjoy birds, please consider getting passerines (finches, canaries) whose antics and songs are joyful but not demanding. Another wonderful option is a beautiful domestic pet pigeon or dove - these birds can become very tame and affectionate, will sit happily on your shoulder attired in "pigeon pants" to contain droppings, do not bite, do not yell (sweet cooing is their sound), and they are not destructive.