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## Addressing Parrot Behavior Problems

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You'll often hear people say parrots make difficult pets. While it is true a parrot is not the right companion for everyone, bad birdie behavior does not have to be inevitable when you share your home with a parrot. Parrots like any other creature learn to present good behaviors and bad behaviors based on the results they produce. In other words they do things to get what they want and to avoid things they don't like. This little tidbit of information can help caregivers make good decisions when undesired behavior appears. For example if your parrot is screaming for your attention, calling back to the bird results in a very good consequence from your bird's perspective. It is in that

moment that a parrot learns screaming works to get attention. This is how parrot caregivers accidentally teach parrots to misbehave. Parrots aren't inherently challenging and by being aware of the basic ways we influence their behavior we can avoid parrot behavior problems altogether. Let's take a closer look at some common parrot behavior problems and explore how to prevent them, common mistakes people make that cause them, and solutions for existing problems.

### Lack of trust

Many people enjoy parrots because they can be cuddly and receptive to touch. Unfortunately not all parrots were raised in a manner that teaches them to trust people. Some may have experienced unpleasant interactions in their lifetime that causes them to fear people. When these parrots are adopted by a loving family it is often frustrating for the caregivers when a bird is not receptive to attempts to interact.

Parrots learn fear responses when they are forced to do things against their will. For example many people have been told that a parrot must obey the step up command. This has caused many parrot owners to push their fingers into a bird's chest to try and get it to step up. Even if done gently this forceful action is not appreciated by most parrots. Many parrots will learn to fear hands and the people attached to them when they are used in a coercive manner. The best way to build trust with your parrot is to avoid creating fear responses in the first place. This means being very careful to observe your bird's body language and not do anything that causes your bird to show a fear response.

When a parrot isn't cooperating don't be tempted to try to force the bird to participate or comply with your wishes. These types of interactions will only make it more difficult to build a trusting relationship with your parrot. Instead empower your parrot to choose to interact with you. If your bird shows any interest, that is your invitation to start making friends.

Some birds have no interest in people whatsoever. A great way to let a parrot know that you have value is to become a treat dispenser. The parrot that doesn't like people typically is not interested in head scratches or human companionship. But they will often accept a treat. If at first the bird won't accept a treat from your hands, just drop it in the bowl and walk away. Pretty soon the bird will learn every time you pass by good things happen. At this stage you can start lingering after you drop the treat and see if the bird will eat in front of you. Eventually you can work towards the bird taking treats from your hands. Once the bird is accepting treats you can start training simple behaviors like targetting. Targetting is just teaching your parrot to orient its beak toward something like a chopstick. Your parrot can learn that touching the chopstick with its beak earns desired treats. This can then be used to train other behaviors.

Eventually as your bird learns you won't be forceful with it and good things happen when you are around it will become more receptive to your attention. This can evolve into allowing head scratches and even cuddles. Take it slow and watch the bird's body language to make sure you're going at a pace that is acceptable to your parrot. Practice these steps to build a trusting relationship with a fearful parrot.

### **Biting and aggressive behavior**

Usually when a parrot bites it is communicating it doesn't like the situation. It could be that the bird is being forced to do something against its will. It could be that it is enjoying the company of its preferred person and someone else walks in the room to interrupt the rendezvous. It could be that it doesn't like what is about to happen. For example some parrots learn to bite to avoid being put back into their cage. This is because sometimes being outside of the cage playing and interacting with its favorite people is much more fun than going back into its enclosure.

The first thing to examine when a parrot shows aggressive behavior is the circumstances that may have contributed to the aggressive behavior. This means looking at everything that was happening in the moment the aggressive behavior occurred. Identify the specific triggers and avoid them if possible. For example if you know the parrot is more likely to bite when it is very excited, don't get your parrot amped up and then offer it your hand as a perch. It would be better to let your parrot calm down before interacting.

Sometimes the circumstances cannot be changed. In these situations it can be helpful to slow down and focus on training your bird to do the desired behavior for positive reinforcement under those conditions. For example if your parrot reaches down to bite your hand as you approach the cage to put the bird away you can train your parrot to look forward to going back into its enclosure. To do this you don't want to rush and force the bird into the cage. Instead grab a handful of treats. As you slowly walk towards the cage offer your bird a treat for sitting calmly on your hand. Every step closer results in goodies. When the bird goes into the cage, offer extra special treats or additional preferred food items. The idea is to make it just as much fun for your parrot to voluntarily go back into the cage as it is to stay outside with you.

If your bird gives you the slightest indication that a bite is eminent, stop walking towards the cage. You want to teach your parrot that very subtle body language is all that needs to be used to let you know that something is bothering your parrot. By responding to these little changes in body language you teach your parrot it doesn't have to bite to communicate.

### **Screaming for attention**

Unpleasant vocalizations meant to get your attention are a preventable, but common problem in the companion parrot community. Out in the wild parrots are almost never alone. When they get separated from their mates or family they will often vocalize loudly. Typically what happens is a flock mate will call back. The response from the other bird reinforces the loud vocalization made by the solitary parrot. This same scenario occurs in our homes. Many times when a parrot is left alone it will vocalize in hopes of getting a response. Many people respond by yelling back, talking quietly to the bird, covering the cage or picking up the bird and bringing it into the same room. All these activities teach the parrot that screaming results in a response from its human companions. This is usually opposite to what parrot caregivers want. Their intentions are to punish or decrease the vocalizations but in reality all these actions reinforce the behavior.

This means that family members need to be very conscientious of what they are doing when a parrot is vocalizing for attention. Ideally undesired vocalizations should receive no response at all. This may require caregivers to freeze in their tracks or walk away the moment a bird screams for attention. This teaches the bird that screaming causes you to disappear. This alone won't work to stop undesired vocalizations. The other part of the solution is heavily reinforcing another behavior that will work to get your attention such as talking, singing or ringing a bell.

Learning to become very aware of how we influence behavior can help caregivers avoid falling into the trap of accidentally reinforcing undesired behaviors such as screaming for attention. The moment your bird presented behavior you don't like, do your best to make sure it doesn't accidentally result in desired

consequences. But also be sure to remember to heavily reinforce your bird with treats, attention or toys when it does something you like.

### **Hormonal behavior**

When people talk about hormonal parrots they are referring to parrots that are in a reproductive state. In other words the hormones associated with reproduction are amplified and coursing through their system. When parrots are in this state they are often more easily triggered to do behaviors caregivers typically do not like. For example a solitary parrot may get particularly anxious when separated from its preferred person and vocalize relentlessly for attention. Another undesired behavior that can occur is that the parrot may show a strong preference for one person in the household and then be quite determined to attack other members of the household. Parrots may also show increased aggressive behavior around the space they consider their territory.



Parrots don't need to be in this state, unless intentionally set up for breeding purposes. There are environmental triggers that cause hormone amplification. These include long light cycles, rich diets, access to a nest like cavity, and a mate like bond with another bird or a person. To avoid the problems associated with hormone amplification a good strategy is to avoid the environmental triggers. This means keeping light cycles consistent throughout the year, avoiding diets that are rich in fat, sugars and carbohydrates, making sure birds don't have access to places they perceive to be nest sites and being careful not to reinforce courtship or sexual behavior when interacting with your parrot. These practices can help keep your bird in a non-reproductive state.

If the bird is already in a reproductive mode, keep in mind that you can still avoid some of the undesired behavior by being very aware of things you do that might trigger problem behavior. For example some birds may show aggressive behavior when you try to change the food and water bowls when the bird is in the cage. Instead of fighting with the bird you can remove the bird from the cage or teach the bird to stand on a perch on the opposite side of the cage while you change the bowls. This stationing behavior can be reinforced with favorite treats. Using this approach you get to reinforce good behavior and avoid putting the bird in the situation in which it may feel compelled to bite.

### **Non compliance**

A common complaint from caregivers is that they just can't get a parrot to do what they want. For example a parrot may continually climb down from a play stand to runaround on the floor and chew up baseboards. Another example is the parrot that refuses to go into a transport cage for veterinary visit. Some people would love to have their parrot wear a harness for outdoor excursions but just can't seem to find a way to get the parrot to cooperate when it comes to wearing one. Other people would love it if there parrots would chew on toys instead of windowsills or other valuable items.

It can be frustrating when you're not sure how to get a parrot to do what you want. A very basic principle to keep in mind is that whatever behavior you want the parrot to do should result in the best consequences. This means it's your job to make it more fun for your parrot to do what you want him to do. This may mean going into the crate results in desired treats that your parrot never gets anywhere else. It can also mean that the best toys are delivered on the play stand. And to make sure that it is never boring new toys appear frequently. Ask yourself "Why should my bird do what I ask him to do?" Because you say so is not good enough. Guarantee your parrot will want to do the behavior you ask by making it very rewarding.

When your bird is making the choice between doing a behavior you want it to do and an undesired behavior, make sure it is difficult for the bird to do the undesired behavior. This may mean rearranging the environment. For example if the parrot's cage is very close to a window sill, this makes it easy for the parrot to chew the wrong thing. Instead make it difficult for the bird to access the wrong thing, but at the

same time make it super easy for your bird to chew the right thing. Have many wonderful tempting items easily within reach and keep the forbidden items far away and difficult to access.

If possible you also want to remove the reinforcing value of doing the wrong behavior. For example if your parrot always runs to your shoulder and you would prefer it stays on your hand, you want to try not to give lots of attention, cuddles and face time to a parrot when it is on your shoulder. Instead offer that wonderful attention when your bird is sitting on your hand. This will help teach your parrot that sitting on your hand is where all the good stuff happens.

If you are trying to teach your parrot to do a challenging behavior like wearing a harness keep in mind the objective is to go at a pace at which the bird shows a high level of comfort. It's very tempting to just put a harness on a bird whether it likes it or not. This often results in the bird learning to be afraid of the harness. Instead use small approximations to gradually apply the harness. Make sure each step is paired with the desired consequence like a food treat. And if the bird ever wants to walk away, let it. By going slow, you will get there faster than if you push to put the harness on the bird before it's ready.



Parrots are learning machines. They can easily learn good behavior or bad behavior depending on what we reinforce. Having an understanding of the basic principles that influence learning can help caregivers prevent undesired behavior and also fix already existing behavior problems. Your parrot is always learning and its behavior is flexible. The parrot problem of today doesn't have to be there tomorrow when you apply these strategies.

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#### **Side Bar:**

### **3 Common Training Mistakes People Make that Cause Behavior Problems**

#### **Mistake #1: Forgetting to reinforce good behavior**

It is very easy to fall into the habit of forgetting to tell your parrot, other pet, even your friends and family when they have done something right, especially after they have learned the desired behavior. We usually just expect good behavior to happen and stay that way forever. But the truth is we have to reinforce that good behavior if we want it to keep happening. So when you parrot steps up onto your hand, goes back in its cage, steps off your shoulder and so on, you should always offer the bird something it likes for being such a good parrot and cooperating. This will help guarantee your parrot will continue to do things when you ask.

#### **Mistake #2: Repeating the cue over and over**

Repeating the cue is a big red flag that the training process needs some attention. When the cue is presented over and over the animal can learn to respond whenever it feels like it. It can also learn the cue is actually "step up, step up, step up" or "wave, wave, wave" instead of just "step up" or "wave." The key to fixing this is to go back in your training process a little bit. For example if I am training a parrot to fly to me, I may keep the distance short instead of asking for a big flight. I then wait for the bird to look like it is 99.9% ready to fly to me. Then I offer my cue. By doing this I will get a quick response to my cue that I will present one time. When the parrot responds, I will offer lots of goodies. Overtime I will gradually add more distance and difficulty. But my first goal is to teach the animal to respond right away to the cue presented one time. If you ever find yourself repeating the cue a lot, stop and do a little retraining to get things back on track.

**Mistake #3: Accidentally reinforcing bad behavior**

The most common example of this with parrots is screaming for attention. Most people don't like it when a parrot vocalizes for our attention. We usually respond with "Be quiet!" or running into the room to shut the door or cover the cage. We think these actions will cause the parrot to see that we are upset and stop the screaming. But instead the parrot learns screaming gets us to call back or come running into the room. In other words screaming results in exactly what the parrot wants. Therefore it will use screaming more often to get attention. It is better to teach the parrot that a different acceptable behavior will work to get attention. This could be talking or singing. Once your parrot starts getting reinforced for the correct behavior and no longer is rewarded for the bad behavior, you will go back to having a well behaved bird.

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