

BIRD BRAINS; CREATING THE MINDFUL PARROT

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When you think, “birdbrain,” that rarely conjures up pictures of soaring intellect. Most likely often you might be throwing out a caustic comment about one of your friends or colleagues. So many of us have birds as pets, and companions, but did you know a parrot has the developed mind of a three- or four-year-old child? Forever. Which means they never grow out of that stage for the 30 to 50 years they may live!

It is essential to know some things about your bird’s brain in order to save both his and your sanity. The actions you take when acquiring a new bird will set the tone for your life together. To be sure that you are starting with a healthy parrot, find a qualified avian veterinarian who will counsel you and conduct appropriate testing. Any behavioral issue may be a sign of underlying disease, and cannot be addressed without first resolving the illness. Just the other day one of my favorite clients, Judy, brought in one of my least favorite patients, Rowdy, her oversized scarlet macaw.

This bird had been chewing on itself and was naked over the front of his neck. “Please fix his stress disorder, Doctor, I’m so frustrated and I know if he could just calm down...” Some requests for psychotropic drugs followed. I evaluated Rowdy and ordered some medical testing before jumping into sedating drug therapy. It turned out that he had an infection of his crop, a food storage organ located in the right region of the neck. In this case Rowdy was simply trying to point out the problem to his human caretakers. We resolved the infection and never had to use psychotropic drugs.

THE JUVENILE PARROT

Treating a young bird like a child may seem like a good idea at the time, but it can lead to problems that may be irreversible. Just as with children, those first few months together are the most impressionable period for your little feathered friend. If you allow a young parrot to sleep in your bed (not as uncommon as it sounds!), there are several risks. You may actually roll over and hurt your own pet. He/she may nip and hurt you. If this bird is carrying a transmittable disease, you may be putting yourself at risk. As your parrot ages, it can become territorial and aggressive about its “space” in the bed. This often results in a severe bite wound to YOU.

One good option for large species is to have an exercise cage and a sleep cage. Polly will feel secure in a smaller cage at night, one that may be covered to promote rest. During the day you can have several perching areas or a large cage in which a parrot can fully stretch its wings and easily flap around. You may have all of these options available. It is critical that none of the perches or tree stands puts your bird in a position above your head or chest level. If they are routinely perched this high, aggression and dominance will develop towards you and other family members. This will be explained later in the “dominance” section. A very important point to remember is that you NEVER leave the cage door open, allowing your bird to enter and exit at will. This specifically teaches them that they are the authority in the household, and they will become very territorial about both the inside and the outside of their own cage. If this has not happened yet, it will. Although it may be convenient right now not to have to get up to let the bird out or

place them onto a perch stand, it is even more inconvenient not to be able to reach into the cage without being bitten or challenged.

In many households people teach their birds to take food directly from a human mouth. You may be saying, “gross!” but it is done in a lot of households. This can lead to problems for both you and your feathered friend. Since birds naturally produce very little saliva, they have very few bacteria in their mouths naturally. Humans, on the other hand, have some of the most polluted mouths to be found in nature! You may unwittingly transmit a bacterial infection to your trusting pet. In addition, this “beaking” behavior is recognized as such by your parrot, and if he/she decides to beak you back, your soft vulnerable skin is no match for that bite.

Another controversial subject is that of wing trimming. Should you allow your parrot to learn to fly? Should they have a “baby trim”? What is the right thing to do for your bird? My advice is to allow a young bird to gain balance skills and practice early flight skills, and after that occurs, start with a modified (partial) trim. You **MUST** see an experienced avian veterinarian to help with this transition. If a parrot is trimmed too severely at too early an age, they can injure themselves by falling to the floor while trying to fly. This may cause a bird to lose confidence and remain timid and fearful. Work closely with your avian veterinarian as soon as you bring your new “baby” home, and both of you will be happier.

DOMINANCE

The first year or two of life for a psittacine are like the early months of your child’s life. No hormones have kicked in yet. When birds were captured out of the wild and brought

into captivity, the young did not reach sexual maturity until three to five years of age (large parrot species). Since the advent of domestic breeding and all of the manmade diets fed to growing birds, and with artificial light cycles created by indoor illumination, parrots are reaching puberty as early as one year of age. This brings with it a multitude of problems. Just like its human counterpart, the teenage bird will start to rebel, test bite, and challenge previously respected boundaries.

Some of you may say, “but Doctor, he’s NEVER bitten anybody...he certainly doesn’t bite ME,” about your eight-month old parrot. Typically, as the medium to large bird (Amazon, cockatoo, macaw, eclectus, African grey, etc.) nears puberty, all sorts of interesting and not so pleasant behaviors emerge. Often this starts with “test biting”-i.e. reaching out to administer a fairly gentle bite. Your reaction to this is critical in determining what happens next.

When a bird is first test biting, it is just that. They are checking for both stability and status. If you continue pushing your hand towards them and give the command, “Step up,” your pet will assume you are not afraid, are also a stable perch, and will step up on your hand. On the contrary, if you pull back in fear, the next nips will be harder as Polly learns to take the lead and dominate you.

Another frequently encountered problem is allowing your bird to walk the floor of the house. It may be easier or more convenient to do this, but it will lead to disaster. As a large bird is allowed to freely get down from a cage or perch stand and walk where they want to (usually to where you are), they assume “ownership” of the entire house. This results in chasing and biting family members’ feet and generally terrorizing the humans in the household. If you never allow the bird to come down, but rather make him wait

until you come get him, using the command “step up,” this puts you in the position of leader of the flock. When a bird steps down onto a perch, use the command “step down,” as a reminder that you are making the calls.

In addition, another inconvenient truth is that you should not allow shoulder perching at all. “What???? How do I do the dishes/clean/check e-mail with my bird?” You ask.

Well, if it’s worth a body part like your nose, lip or flesh of your cheek, then have at it.

But most people like their faces arranged just the way they are. So please keep that large feathered friend on your forearm, below your head, on a perch stand (below the level of your head), or INSIDE the cage. Remember not to allow Polly to exit and enter the cage on his own terms.

THOSE CRAZY HORMONES

Many, many, MANY behavioral problems stem from inappropriate bonding to you. This means your parrot sees you as a MATE, not an owner or flock leader. Things that create this include heavy cuddling, petting over the back- especially toward the tail- and scratching up under the wings . Yes, I realize those of you with cockatoos just cringed or yelled out an expletive. However, I assure you this will result in mate-bonded behaviors that are detrimental to your bird. These include regurgitating, masturbation and possible prolapsing cloaca, abnormal egg-laying and egg-binding. If that hasn’t happened yet, consider yourself lucky. Obviously, the problems are worse with a female parrot. But males can also have cloacal problems from being mate-bonded to owners. They can be so stimulated that they push out rectal-type tissue; this condition, if recurrent, is life-threatening.

TIPS

- Treat your baby bird like BIRD, not a human being
- Do not allow your feathered pet to sleep in the bed with you
- Start wing trimming at a few months of age, after balance is obtained.
- No shoulder perching!
- Do not feed from your mouth to your bird's beak
- No floor walking allowed
- The cage door is kept closed and you remove and place your pet on a separate play stand
- No high perches (above family members' heads), including top of cage
- Avoid heavy cuddling and petting over back
- Avoid feeding by hand after one year of age (stimulates mate bonding)

If you pay attention to these simple rules, you will subtly establish a hierarchy with you at the top, and you will have less biting and bad behavior to contend with later in life. Here's wishing you many happy years together!

Look for future articles about how foraging games can fix bird-brained behavior problems!

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