

# The Gabriel Foundation

Beyond the Birdie Basics  
Behavior

# Normal Parrot Behavior

Normal Parrots are:

- Bright eyed and alert
- Perch upright
- Explore cage and new toys
- Notice everything
- Swing and climb
- Like to vocalize
- Very messy
- Like to chew on everything
- Flap their wings
- Use their feet actively
- Use their beak as a hand
- Very social

# Abnormal Behaviors

Abnormal Behavior can indicate illness, injury or disease.

- Sitting listlessly at the bottom of the cage
  - Being extremely quiet
  - Hunching over or drooping head
  - Change in droppings
  - Not eating
  - Limping
  - Unable to perch
  - Feather destruction
- Birds in the wild hide their illnesses to escape predation.
  - If your bird is acting sick —it is **VERY** sick and there is no time to lose.
  - If the bird is screaming or biting for no apparent reason, consider an injury and go to the vet.

# Reinforcing Behavior

- When picking a method of behavioral modification, ask yourself:
  - Does it make sense?
  - Does it harm the bird?
  - Is it the **LEAST** intrusive and **LEAST** forceful method?
  - If your bird has a sudden change in behavior, consult with your vet **FIRST**

# Reinforcing Behavior

- Birds are CUTE! And SWEET!
- They are also SMART and learn quickly how to manipulate their owners into doing whatever they want.
- If a bird learns they can demand anything with a scream or other behavior, they will continue with that and that behavior will increase.
- If I scream, you'll come feed me.
- If I fall, you'll come rescue me.
- If I feather pick, you'll pay attention to me
- Pay attention to what behavior you are rewarding!

# Reinforcing Behavior

## Positive Reinforcement

- The most effective training method.
- **OUR BEST FRIEND!**
- Reward a bird when it is behaving well, ignore it when it is behaving badly.
- In order for positive reinforcement to work:
  - The reward must immediately follow the behavior.
  - Rewards must be consistent.
  - The reward has to be motivating for the bird.
  - Create a demand for your reward.
  - The more precious the commodity, the more it is sought after.
  - Increase the quantity or desirability of the reward for excellent behavior.

# Reinforcing Behavior

- Punishments will only destroy any trust the bird has in you.
- Most, if not all, behavior problems can be solved with positive reinforcement methods.
  - NEVER HIT A BIRD! NEVER!
  - The only effective discipline is a quickly executed, very short time out (<2 min), administered IMMEDIATELY after the bad or inappropriate behavior
  - Don't shoot the bird with water, scream or shake the cage.
  - It is better to anticipate and prevent bad behavior than to punish it.
  - Remember, be careful of “quick fixes.”

# Reinforcing Behavior

- Prevent problems rather than solve them by understanding what occurred immediately preceding the behavior.
- All behavior is motivated by something.
- It's up to you to solve the puzzle “why” your bird did that.
- Don't take bad behaviors personally, but do address the environment surrounding the bad behavior and your role in the behavior.
  - If you over-cuddle your bird, you will get breeding behaviors and separation anxiety from your bird.
  - If you overexcite your bird, you may get bitten.
  - If your bird acts afraid, see what is frightening it
- Were you attentive to your bird's body language?
- Behavior is a function of the environment.

# Reinforcing Behavior

## Ten Ways to Promote Desired Behavior

- Describe what your bird does, not what your bird is.
- Identify what you want your bird “to do,” instead of “not do.”
- Arrange the environment to stimulate activity and mental stimulation with enrichment items.
- Identify what your birds’ reinforcers are by observing what it chooses to do.
- Catch your bird being good more time each day than you can count.
- Reinforce behavior you want to see more often.
- Ignore behaviors you want to see less often.
- Change what *you* do to change what your bird does.
- Replace force with facilitation – give your bird a reason (consequence) to do what you need it to do.
- Empower – don’t overpower – your bird – healthy animals need to be able to affect their environments too.

# Reinforcing Behavior

Shouldering is generally not recommended.

- Bites happen!
- You relinquish control of your bird.
- The bird may think of you as his mate.
- Discourages independence.
- If...
  - Your bird has never bitten you.
  - Your bird steps up well off the shoulder.
  - Your bird does not run up your arm to the shoulder.
  - Your bird likes being on his play-stand as much as your shoulder.
- Then you can have your bird on your shoulder for short periods of time.

# Reinforcing Behavior

## Dominance in parrots

- There has never been a scientific study to confirm hierarchy in flocks.
- “Height dominance” fallacy -when a bird tries to misbehave when higher than the owner’s head.
- Most parrots can be trained to step up from any height.
- The real advantage to having your parrot on lower perches is so that they remain within your reach and are not as awkward to have step up.
- Dominance is a construct which has caused a lot overly aggressive quick fixes in parrots such as “He’s dominating you? Dominate him back!”
- Read “The Dominance Myth” by S. Friedman, Ph.D.

# Bonding with Your Parrot

- Owners often unknowingly perpetuate breeding behaviors that stimulate hormones in bird.
  - Allowing parrots access to dark places – like happy huts or under shelves, cabinets or in drawers.
  - Petting parrots down their back, under their wings, pulling the tail and rubbing the beak.
  - Allowing parrot to continually be on the shoulder.
  - Feeding warm soft foods.
  - Feeding high fat diets.
- Prevention:
  - Don't over-cuddle your birds, teach independence.
  - Encourage toys and foraging behaviors.
  - Exercise!!
  - Lots of showers.

# Bonding with Your Parrot

In the wild, parrots form three kinds of bonds: social bonds with flock, members, monogamous pair bond with a potential mate, and a mated pair that produce young.

## **Characteristics of social bonds:**

- Birds feed and shelter together in flocks.
- Birds maintain minimal distance between each other.
- Bird occasionally preen each other for brief amounts of time.

## **Characteristics of monogamous pairs:**

- Begin to spend more time together.
- Increased amounts of preening.
- Begin to seek out and defend a nest site.
- Begin courtship regurgitation.
- Initiate mating behavior.

## **Characteristics of a mating pair:**

- Spend time exclusively with each other.
- Aggressively defend nest site.
- Aggressively drive off other flock members.

# Bonding with Your Parrot

Ideally owners maintain only **social bonds** with pet parrots.

- Monogamous pair bonds and mated pair bonds often lead to undesirable behaviors. These include:
  - Attempting to drive off or bite other human members of the household.
  - Aggressively defending perceived “nesting sites” such as cages, boxes, etc.
  - Increased regurgitation and mating behaviors.
  - Screaming and agitation when separated from human “mate.”
  - Sexual frustration and feather plucking.
- **Ways to maintain a social pair bond and discourage other bonds:**
  - Encourage all family member to interact with the bird regularly and equally.
  - Schedule times for the bird to meet and interact with willing strangers.
  - Limit petting to brief, non-intense episodes, such as occasionally scratching the head.
  - Maintain proper “social distance” for most interactions with the bird.
  - Discourage / ignore all regurgitation or masturbating behavior.
  - Remove any perceived nest site or nesting materials.
  - Work with your parrot on trick training

# Parrot Stages

Baby parrots need to learn to:

- Eat a variety of nutritious foods.
- Play on their own.
- Spend time happily in their cage.
- Be comfortable spending time in a towel.
- Spend time on play-stands.
- Go to many types of people.
- Bathe.
- Accept new things on a daily basis.
- Taught to step up with positive reinforcement.
- Sleep comfortably.
- Keep a good eye on them as they can be accident prone and get themselves into trouble.

# Parrot Stages

## Teenage Parrots or “The Terrible Twos”

- Age of sexual maturity age depends on the species.
- Maturing bird will test the owner’s patience.
- Bird may change loyalties rapidly.
- If you made mistakes in teaching your baby bird how to properly live in a home, you will learn about it now!
- In the wild, the young parrot will explore its environment more and start to look for a mate.
- Give the bird plenty of ways to expend energy.
- Continue teach the bird behaviors with positive reinforcement.
- Make sure the house is bird proofed for the explorations of the growing and learning parrot.
- Don’t get frustrated or give up!
- Baby parrots are easy, teenage parrots are hard.

# Non-medical Behavioral Problems

- Feather destruction
  - Extreme cage or other territoriality
  - Constant screaming
  - Aggression
  - Phobias
  - Biting
- 
- While these problems are generally not medically related, they **COULD** be, so please see a vet if your parrot's behavior suddenly changes!

# Behavior Problems

## Phobias

- Prevention is better than cure.
- Make change an everyday part of your bird's life.
  - New Toys
  - New Foods
  - New Places
  - New People
- Introduce new items at the bird's comfort level.
- Praise the bird for being brave and approaching things he's scared of.
- Gradually bring something "scary" closer and closer to the bird – work slowly.
- Do not reinforce phobic behavior.
  - "Oh, is Petey scared? Mommy will take care of you!"
  - Petey will be more and more scared to get Mommy's attention.

# Behavior Problems

## Biting

- Biting is the parrot's LAST resort.
- In the wild, they will display and vocalize to get their message across.
- Humans are generally denser than parrots, so they need a more obvious signal - biting!
- Many birds are beaky and explore with their beaks and tongues -this is not biting.
- Don't take bites personally.
- Understand what you were doing when the bird bit you, and see if you can change the circumstances.
- Pay attention to the bird's more subtle signals and leave it alone if it seems like it will bite; watch its body language.
- Punishing bites is counterproductive and may cause increased biting or loss of trust.

# Behavior Problems

## Biting

- If you are bitten:
  - Calmly set the bird down.
  - Don't yell, scream, hit or drop the bird.
  - Back away from the bird.
  - Take a break from the bird for a moment.
  - Calm down.
  - Don't take the bite personally.
  - Recognize what you were doing when you were bit.
  - Recognize the bird's body language before it bit you.
- When you re-approach the bird, offer it positive reinforcement for doing what you wanted it to do when you were bitten.
- If the bird still indicates it wants to bite you, back off again.
- Either you will have to come back again later, or the bird will decide the reward is worth what you are asking it to do.....this may take time.

# Behavior Problems

## Reasons for screaming

- Bird could be in pain.
- Bird could be frightened of something.
- Bird could be tired and cranky and trying to tell you to put it to bed.
- Bird is mimicking other parrots.
- Bird is bored.
- Bird is overly attached to one person and screams when that person leaves the room.

# Behavior Problems

## Screaming

- Once again, prevention is better than cure.
- **DO NOT EVER** go to your bird when it is vocalizing in a way you don't like (unless it is an emergency!)
- Don't let your bird connect **SCREAMING=ATTENTION**
- Vocalization is normal, repetitive nonstop screaming for hours is not.
- Contact calls are appropriate, and you should respond to them. vocally "Are you there?" "I'm here!" or risk a screaming bout.
- If your bird is a bad screamer, teach your bird an acceptable call that it can use to summon you – but then every time they use that call, you must respond.

# Environmental Considerations

Provide supervised freedom for your bird.

- Don't keep your bird in his cage any more than is necessary!
- But...keep an eye on the little troublemakers!
- If you aren't home put the bird in his cage and close the cage door.
- Playstands and hanging play gyms are a necessity
- They allow flock interaction without mate like behavior.
- They should have many places for toys.
- Reward your bird for playing with his toys on the playstand!
- Consider a portable playstand for traveling!
- Exercise helps solve many behavioral problems!

# Environmental Considerations

## Sleeping Arrangements

- Make sure your bird is getting enough sleep.
- 10-12 hours of sleep in a quiet and darkened room is recommended.
- Covering the cage may not be enough unless the cage is in a separate room from the people.
- Sleeping cages are a great option in a quiet room (small cage or travel carrier).
- Many birds will let you know when it is bedtime, by fluffing up their feathers and tucking one leg up as well as light beak grinding.
- Lack of sleep can cause irritability, feather picking and stress.

# Environmental Considerations

## Exercise

- Prevents boredom and behavior problems!
- Flapping exercises
- Going on walks
- Climbing
- Swinging
- Placing the bird on the bottom of the cage and having him climb up.
- Playing floor games
- Playing fetch or catch
- Trick training
- If your bird is out of shape, take it slow and don't overexert your bird!
- Exercise helps the bird's mind and strengthens the bond between bird and owner.

# Environmental Considerations

## Mental Stimulation is Necessary for Parrots

- Make your bird think!
- Foraging and puzzle toys are great.
- Teach your bird about different objects.
- Take your bird on tours and trips – outside or inside.
- Rotate toys to keep the bird interested in them.
- Find ways to hide food in toys.
- Give your bird a toy box filled with foot toys and other interesting objects at the bottom of the cage.
- Teach your bird tricks!

# ABC's of Behavior

- One such approach to understanding specific behaviors is known as ABC analysis. The letters stand for the three elements of a simplified behavioral “equation” which includes the *antecedents*, *behavior*, and *consequences*.
- With this strategy, we seek to identify through careful observation the events and conditions that occur before the behavior – *antecedents*, as well as identifying the results that follow the *behavior*, *consequences*.
- Changing behaviors is performed through changing the antecedents or consequences.
- [Read ABC by S.G. Friedman, Ph.D., Utah State University](#)

# Basic Training

- Many parrot species talk, but not all individual parrots will talk – there are no guarantees.
- Greys, Amazons, Parrotlets, Budgies, Eclectus, Macaws, Cockatoos – Budgies are the best and hold the world's record!
- Parrots are social flock animals and communication with their immediate flock is critical!
- Encourage your parrot to talk by talking to him, and reward his talking with vocalizations, petting or treats.
- Include your bird in conversations rather than reciting phrases. Birds learn in context.
- Be consistent with your greetings and terms.
- Birds will practice a word over and over before they incorporate it into their daily routine.
- Praise the bird when it says something you like! Give it treats immediately!
- Talking tapes and CDs will probably bore your bird if listened to for a long period of time.

# Basic Training

## Step-Up

- Teach it using positive reinforcement.
- Listen to your bird!
- Forcing your bird to step up will result in bites.
- Pay attention to your bird's body language.
- Go at your bird's pace.
- Try to get the bird to walk across your hand for an offered treat.
- Practice this until you are both comfortable.
- Don't chase or otherwise intimidate your bird into stepping up.
- Practice stepping up and down off of different objects (hand, perch, towel).
- Birds step UP, not down. They have a harder time reaching down with their feet.

# Basic Training

## Potty Training

- Pick a place for the bird to potty (for instance, over newspaper).
- When the bird looks like it is going to go potty, take it to the newspaper.
- When the bird goes on the newspaper, praise it and give it a treat.
- Pay constant attention to your bird and expect it to need to go to the bathroom every 20-30 minutes.
- Soon enough, your bird will see that being held over the newspaper is a cue for going potty, and they will be rewarded when they potty there.

# Basic Training

- Notice what your bird likes to do naturally.
- Figure out how that can be incorporated into tricks – be creative!
- Use positive reinforcement – reward the behaviors you are looking for or intermittent steps towards those behaviors.
- Be patient – don't frustrate the bird.
- Take small steps.
- Bribe the bird to get it to move or do certain things.
- Clicker training is an excellent technique.

# Basic Training

## Trick Training – The Wave

- Put your hand to the bird as if you were going to have it step up it up.
- When it lifts its foot, say “good” or click and reward.
- You should incorporate a hand or vocal signal with this so the bird can identify what you want him to do.
- Work slowly and patiently and stop when the bird is no longer interested in treats.
- Phase out the step up hand and get further from the bird as the bird understands the behavior.

# Target Training

- Target training is a fun and easy technique used to encourage desired behaviors such as entering a carrier or even trick training. In brief, the goal is to get the bird to willingly go to a target in anticipation of a reward.
- Before you can begin you need 3 things:
  - A *target*, which should be a readily available easily identified object that the bird normally would not see outside of training. Suggestions are: a chopstick, an unusually colored and/or shaped toy, a bell, etc.
  - A *clicker*, available at most larger pet stores
  - A *reward* that the bird really enjoys, never gets any other time, and can be consumed very quickly. Suggestions are 1/2 shelled sunflower seed, tiny bit of popcorn or dried fruit.
- To begin, place the bird on a tabletop and place the target some distance away. Wait for the bird to approach the target and touch it with his beak. Immediately click, praise and offer the reward.
- Repeat until the bird learns touching the target means a reward.
- Now you can place the target in various places to shape a behavior, for example, going into the carrier.