



New Parrot Owner Behavior Guidelines

What an exciting day! You have welcomed a new parrot into your home. Having a parrot as a companion can be an incredibly rewarding experience. The following information is designed to help you create a well-behaved companion parrot and allow you to experience the richly rewarding relationship that can be achieved with these amazing creatures.

BASIC BEHAVIOR CONCEPTS:

Here are some basic behavior concepts that can help you as you get to know your bird.

Learn how to read and interpret your bird's body language:

This is how your bird communicates to you. Notice how your bird holds his feathers, how his eyes appear, what he is doing with his mouth, etc. during different times of the day. Decide by what you see if your bird is content, nervous, excited, scared, territorial, aggressive, etc. Try to remember what body postures go with what state of mind. Use this information when you interact with your bird. Try to avoid doing things that cause your bird to display behavior that indicates he is scared, nervous or aggressive. Focus on interactions that seem to promote a relaxed and happy bird. For example, if you try to pick up your bird and his body language shows that he might bite, respect what he just told you with his body language and try again later. You can also try to persuade your bird to look forward to stepping up by using a treat or reward.

Find a treat that works:

Having a food treat that your bird really likes to use to reward good behavior is an excellent tool for creating or modifying behavior. The treat is your way of communicating to your bird that what he just did was "good". An easy way to identify a good treat for your bird is to feed your bird his normal diet in the morning. Notice what food item your bird eats first. That is probably his favorite food. Take that item out of the regular morning feeding and use it to reward your bird for good behavior throughout the day. Many parrots also enjoy sunflower seeds, peanuts, nuts, grapes, etc. Make sure to break big items into smaller pieces for more opportunities to reinforce your bird and to help avoid feeding your bird too many treats.

Don't make your bird do anything he doesn't want to do:

This may seem like common sense, but it is often easily overlooked. Reading your bird's body language is very important when trying to do this. Recognize when your bird is telling you "no" with his body language. Instead of continuing to force the issue, try to find a way to get your bird to do what you want using positive methods, like using treats and rewards for steps in the right direction. This will help build a positive and trusting relationship between you and your bird.

Ignore undesired behavior, reward desired behavior:

It is easy to react to undesired behavior when we see it. However, this isn't always an effective way to modify that behavior. For example, if your parrot screams for attention, walking over to his cage to yell at him can actually be the attention your bird was looking for. This can teach your bird to scream to get you to come over to his cage. If instead you wait until the bird stops screaming, or does something else, and then go over to your bird, you will teach him "quiet" or other behaviors will get the desired attention.

Teach your bird to do what you want by rewarding little steps of progress towards the desired behavior:

It may take longer to teach your bird to do something using positive methods, but in the long run both you and your bird will be happier. Instead of forcing your bird to do whatever you would like him to do, break the behavior down into little achievable steps. After your bird performs each step, give him a treat. Eventually you can get to the desired behavior and the entire process will have been positive and fun for your bird. For example you can teach your bird to step up onto your hand by rewarding him for taking a step towards your hand, for lifting a foot, for putting a foot on your hand, for putting both feet on your hand, for allowing you to move your hand and so on. By doing this, you can create a bird that looks forward to doing what you ask him to do.



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TRAINING:

Teaching your bird that something good will happen when he or she is displaying desired behavior is positive reinforcement training. This training can be applied in every interaction you have with your bird. It is highly recommended you use positive reinforcement to train your bird from the first day. Every interaction you have with your bird is teaching your bird something. By focusing on using positive reinforcement to teach desired behavior you will be amply rewarded with a well behaved, loving companion parrot. There are a number of resources to help you learn about positive reinforcement training. Many may have heard of “clicker training”. Clicker training is positive reinforcement training that uses a click sound to let the animal know it did the right thing. You do not have to use a clicker to train. Other signals such as the word “good” or a whistle, can replace the click. However the basic principle of clicker training is positive reinforcement training and therefore there is much to learn from training information that is labeled “clicker training”. The following is a list of recommended resources on positive reinforcement training

Literature

Don't Shoot the Dog! The New Art of Teaching and Training

By Karen Pryor (1999 Bantam Publishers)

This book is essential to anyone's collection. It discusses some basic training principles in very simple language. The training principles are then applied to everyday situations to help understand how they can be used with animals and people. It is easy to read and inexpensive as well. Available through www.clickertraining.com

Animal Training: Successful Animal Management through Positive Reinforcement

By Ken Ramirez (1999 Shedd Aquarium Publishers)

This book is a collection of articles written about animal training. It is very comprehensive and includes a great deal of information. Articles cover a variety of animal species. It is a large book and a bit more expensive, but worth it. It is available by calling toll free 1-888-732-7883 (1-888-SEA-STUF) or visiting www.sheddnet.org. This book is also available through www.amazon.com.

Good Bird Magazine

Published quarterly by Good Bird Inc. Available at www.goodbirdinc.com

Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavioral Problems in Companion Parrots.

By Barbara Heidenreich. Available at www.avianpublications.com

The Parrot Problem Solver. Addressing Aggressive Behavior.

By Barbara Heidenreich. Available at www.avianpublications.com

Clicking With Birds: A Beginners Guide to Clicker Training Your Companion Parrot

By Linda Morrow. Available at www.avi-train.com/manual.html

Clicker Training with Birds

By Melinda Johnson. Available at www.clickertraining.com

Internet Resources

Good Bird Inc

www.GoodBirdInc.com

Applied Companion Animal Behavior Network- Avian Pages

www.acabn.com/avianlist.html

An Animal Trainers Introduction to Operant and Classical Conditioning

www.wagntrain.com/OC

The Writings of Susan Friedman, PhD.

www.behaviorworks.org

The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE)

www.IAATE.org

Animal Behavior Management Alliance (ABMA)

www.theABMA.org

The Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies

The website offers forums to discuss behavior and an excellent collection of definitions of applied behavior analysis terminology. www.behavior.org

Practice the timing of your bridges

www.clickertales.com/clickertiminggame.html

Workshops:

Parrot Behavior and Training Workshops -Good Bird Inc

Barbara Heidenreich

Offering workshops specifically catered for the companion parrot community and also veterinary professionals

www.GoodBirdInc.com

Living and Learning with Parrots: The Fundamental Principles of Behavior

Online Class

By Susan G Friedman, Ph.D.

www.behaviorworks.org.

Videos:

Parrot Behavior and Training by Good Bird Inc. Available at www.goodbirdinc.com

List Serves:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clickbirds/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BirdClick/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pickinparrots/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ParrotBAS/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GoodBirdGroup/>

PRACTICAL BEHAVIORS TO TRAIN:

It is highly recommended you take the knowledge you learn about positive reinforcement training and use it to teach the behaviors listed below. You will find many situations in which you will be glad your bird has learned how to comfortably present these behaviors. Remember positive reinforcement training is about teaching a bird using small approximations towards the desired behavior and positively reinforcing the bird after each success. It does not involve the use of force or aversives.

Step up onto the hand

Step up onto the hand of other people

Enter a kennel or other travel container

Play in a towel

Step onto a scale

Go back into the cage

BEHAVIORS TO TRAIN FOR FUN:

You can also have a great time using positive reinforcement to train your bird. This training strategy can allow you to teach your bird a variety of behaviors that can be fun for you, your friends and your bird. Most importantly fun training sessions help to strengthen the bond between you and your bird.

Touching a target

Wave with a foot

Wave with a wing

Stretch wings out

Nod "yes"

Shake head "no"

Turn around

Retrieve an object

Talk on cue



BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS:

The following is a list of problems that are usually created by owners accidentally reinforcing undesired behavior. After each problem is a brief explanation of how to avoid these problems. More information can be found on solving behavior problems in the book “Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots” by Barbara Heidenreich.

Biting: Biting does not have to be a part of having a parrot in the home. Biting can easily be avoided. Focus on using positive reinforcement to create behavior instead of using force for things like stepping up onto the hand, or getting to know new people.

Screaming: Screaming for attention or to know where others are, is a behavior that is often accidentally reinforced by owners. If a bird screams for attention do not run into the room or scream back. This reinforces the behavior. Teach the bird that other behavior such as whistling, talking, or silence will cause you to come over for a visit.

Bonding to One Person: Parrots have a tendency to choose one person as their favorite and may behave aggressively towards others. This can be avoided by associating positive reinforcement with many other people. Teach your bird that interacting nicely with others results in good things, such as food treats.

Feather Destructive Behavior: Some parrots chew or pick their feathers. This can be caused by a medical condition. Therefore it is important to seek qualified veterinary attention at the sign of this behavior. However good nutrition, regular bathing, exposure to UV light, and plenty of novel enrichment (toys, attention, and training) can be very helpful in preventing feather destructive behavior that might not be based in a medical condition.

The new parrot owner behavior guidelines are designed to provide a brief introduction into strategies that can assist you in creating a well behaved and enjoyable parrot companion. It is suggested new owners explore the recommended resources to continue the journey towards good parrot behavior. It can be an amazing joy and privilege to share your life with a parrot. We hope your experience is unforgettable.

