

GOOD TIMING:

MAKING THE MOST OF ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES TO CHANGE PARROT BEHAVIOR

By Mattie Sue Athan

Behavior is difficult to change in the environment in which it developed. This is the most common issue anyone wishing to change companion parrot behavior must confront. Unless a consultant can convince a person to change either his or her own behavior, then the bird cannot reasonably be expected to change. Since people control all elements related to the bird's care, changing human behavior is also instrumental in changing the bird's environment.

While many people hire a consultant and intentionally try to implement changes in their parrot, some opportunities for behavioral change also occur spontaneously. A wise parrot owner looks for just those opportunities. Good timing, taking advantage of opportunities to reinforce any behaviors we want to see again, is the easiest way to establish desirable behaviors as permanent features in a parrot's life.

PEOPLE CHANGES: Almost all interactive behavior involves a stimulus and a response. If the stimulus is changed, the response is changed. If the new response is appropriately reinforced, the new behavior replaces the old one. This simple equation is easy to understand but not always easily applied. Anyone seeking to make intentional changes to affect a bird's behavior, probably asks friends, searches the Internet, looks for solutions in a book, or goes to a consultant. Most people probably choose to implement the easiest solutions and this may or may not be the best approach. Sometimes the best way with parrots seems counterintuitive to humans, and the easiest approach might actually make matters worse.

For example, it's only natural to react to something by saying "no" and naming what we don't want to be done, but telling a bird "No! Don't bite!" might actually stimulate and reinforce biting. While the sharp "No!" at the beginning of the

sentence might momentarily distract the bird from the behavior, hearing the word "bite" at the end of the sentence might remind the bird how much fun it is to see people jump and scream in pain. The naming of the unwanted behavior can actually stimulate the behavior.

I call this "The Lifeguard Principle." When I was a kid there were signs all around the swimming pool saying "No Running by the Pool!" Now lifeguards are trained to tell people what they want them to do, preferably before they do anything. Now the signs and the lifeguards are supposed to say "Walk," or "Slow Down or Get in the Pool."

This principle is more difficult to implement than it sounds. An untrained person who is interacting with a bird, and worried about being bitten, is probably more likely to say "No, don't bite me!" than "Be a good bird." But the first statement is confusing to the bird if that person is seeking interaction, and the second statement is more likely to elicit a positive response from the bird.

HOME CHANGES: When a parrot moves to a new "flock," it must learn the ways of the new flock in order to successfully "fit in." Therefore, the easiest, most obvious time for new behaviors to appear is when a parrot changes homes. During the first few days, weeks, or months in a new home, a behavioral learning period occurs during which new behaviors

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THE TALL MAN AND THE BABY COCKATIEL

Somewhere around 1990, I enjoyed a most interesting behavioral consultation and wing-feather trim in my office in Denver. The bird was a very young, juvenile female cinnamon pearl cockatiel, and the man was very, very tall, so it was more than a little amusing to see that the 100 gram bird would not allow the large man to scratch her neck.

As she sat on one hand, he would approach her stiffly but quietly with the other hand. She would open her beak and say "Ak, Ak, Ak, Ak," to the approaching finger, and it would be withdrawn.

"I wonder what would happen if you distracted her attention from your hand by talking to her sweetly." I suggested. "Talk to her like you talk to your wife. 'Say to her, 'you're very pretty,' and 'I love you very much,' and 'I only want you to be happy.'"

After giving me a strange look, this guy then turned to his bird and said, "I think you're very pretty, and I love you very much, and I only want you to be happy."

And as he whispered sweet things, he approached her with his finger, and she put her little head down, and he scratched her neck.

I didn't think I'd ever see him again, but sure enough, only six or eight weeks later, he called for another grooming appointment.

That's odd, I thought, I can't imagine that the bird's wings need trimming again.

And, in fact I don't believe they did; I think he came in for quite another reason. As I handled the bird, stepped her up and scratched her little head, I couldn't help but notice how sweet and cooperative she was.

"Oh, my," I said, "You've made quite a difference in this bird's behavior!"

The man smiled a shy little smile, didn't make eye contact, and said, "If you think that's something, you should see the change in my wife!"



are stimulated and can be easily reinforced.

Unfortunately, most of us have heard of or seen perfectly behaved baby parrots going to a new home and being returned within weeks or months as "biters" or "screamers" when those behaviors were not present in the bird before the home change. This was probably the result of "bad timing" -- inadvertent stimulation of the unwanted behavior combined with accidental reinforcement of the unwanted behavior.

Likewise, anyone with a decade or two of

experience with parrots have seen birds with many reported misbehaviors go to a new home where those behaviors never appear.

How does this happen? If the new environment is sufficiently safe, comfortable, and stimulating; and if humans in the new home know how to reinforce the desired behaviors that naturally occur in the bird, the unwanted behaviors sometimes never appear. Sometimes they appear only once or twice and, if they are not reinforced, they are simply gone.

Simply ignoring it cannot eliminate behavior; one behavior must be replaced by another. Only by providing for appropriate behaviors can inappropriate ones truly disappear. Good timing, reinforcing what we want to see again, can make or break a bird's opportunities to develop desired behavior. We humans must be ever watchful for opportunities to reinforce, and learn to disregard and avoid stimulating what we don't want to see.

SEASONAL OPPORTUNITIES: As temperatures go up and daylight hours

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lengthen, parrots begin molting, a process that replaces old feathers with new. This period during which feathers grow in quickly is a wonderful window-of-opportunity for replacing feather-damaging behaviors with bathing, toy play, good diet and sleep habits, and appropriate preening behaviors. Any new behavior appearing during this time can be facilitated and reinforced, and feather-damaging behaviors can be left behind.

Likewise, as parrots grow older, territorial behaviors appear during breeding seasons. Here are a set of behaviors that are usually unwanted and unappreciated in companion parrots. Humans can learn new ways in order to safely care for their birds while at the same time not reinforcing unwanted behavior. It isn't easy, but it's almost always possible if people take advantage of good timing by providing opportunities for behaviors they want to see again and reinforcing them until unwanted behaviors again disappear. ■

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