

Only Dogs Make Good Pets?

by Kelly Tucker, Estancia, NM

Take a puppy away from his mother when he is two weeks old. Tube feed him for two

weeks. Transfer him to a pet store where he is bottle fed for a few days, then sold to someone who has never had a puppy and doesn't know anyone else who has ever had a puppy.

The new owner is thrilled with having a puppy. All the warm, fuzzy puppy things are there and this person carries the puppy around constantly -- except when he needs to go to work, make dinner, or sleep. At those times, the puppy is put in a small crate where he can stand up, turn around and lie down. The puppy has no room to run or play. The puppy is hobbled so that he can't jump on people or run away.

He is fed saltine crackers and water in the crate and food from the owner's plate at mealtime. No one else is allowed to play with or hold the puppy because the owner wants the puppy to grow up and love only him.

When the puppy cries or barks, the owner gives him a dog biscuit and a pat on the head to shut him up. Eventually, the routine of daily life returns and the owner spends less and less time with the puppy. By now, what the owner possesses is a dog that barks constantly, is physically stunted, sick and malnourished, kennel shy and a fear biter that tries to mate with the owner's leg. Would this dog be a good pet? NO!

Why then do we expect birds who are brought up in the same way to make good pets? The fact is: they don't. Is this the bird's fault? Does this mean that birds and dogs do not make good pets? Of course not. Most people know that puppies need good food, exercise, proper socialization and training to be good pets.

Surprise! So do birds. The results of bringing up a bird the way this puppy was treated are exactly the same. Most people do not have the experience with birds that they have with dogs.

Most people know not to buy a puppy before it is seven weeks old. Puppies need to stay with their mothers and their litter mates long enough

to identify themselves as dogs and learn appropriate pack behavior. This also avoids sexual confusion later in life.

The many species of birds all mature at different rates and have different developmental windows at different ages. There is much debate among knowledgeable bird people because each species matures on a different schedule. Knowledge in one species does not always transfer to another species. Just because a person has raised Cockatiels, does NOT make him an expert on Amazons. But that is another topic.

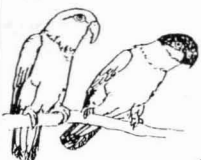
Just like puppies that are carried around everywhere they go and kept crated the rest of the time, birds that are constantly carried or caged have no opportunity to develop their muscles and bones. They do not develop the physical skills that they need to grow up as healthy confident birds. They become fearful of any new situation or person. Puppies are usually not reliably house trained either.

We know a lot more about dog nutrition now than we do about bird nutrition. However, we do know that a diet of just seeds, no matter how "fortified", is not a nutritious diet for a bird. Because of their high metabolic rate, proper nutrition at every meal is even more important for birds. Birds are designed for flight. Their digestive systems are short and fast. Since they must fly, food needs to be fairly concentrated and nutrient-rich. Birds are not designed for high-fiber diets. It's why they hull seeds and throw away the skin on fruits, beans, corn and peas. They chew up and spit out carrot pulp, while drinking the juice. Many people don't realize this and assume that the bird is just making a mess playing with his vegetables.

Birds, like puppies, need proper socialization into a flock or pack.

Worst case: the owner stops giving the bird vegetables. A malnourished bird is a sick bird. How much do you feel like playing and interacting with folks when you're hungry, tired, sick

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and depressed? Parrots and puppies feel the same way.

Birds, like puppies, need proper socialization into a flock or pack. This is the time when the individual's sense of who he is and where he fits into the social group is established. Knowing who he is and how he relates to the rest of his world is what gives him the confidence to explore and interact with his world. Meeting many benevolent loving people allows the young animal to make the generalization that people are benevolent and loving. When puppies and birds are exposed to only one person or playmate and no one else is allowed to play with or hold them, birds and dogs grow distrustful of others. What you end up with is the equivalent of a "junk-yard dog," definitely not a pet. While the dog's reaction to a perceived danger is to bite the stranger thus driving away the danger, the bird's reaction is to bite the loved one in order to drive the loved one away from the danger.

Of course, the idea of hobbling a puppy is ridiculous. So should be the idea of severely clipping a bird's wings before he has properly fledged.

Of course, the idea of hobbling a puppy is ridiculous. So should be the idea of severely clipping a bird's wings before he has properly fledged. He should learn to fly up and down, turn in flight and land softly. At the same time, he cannot be allowed to get enough speed to slam into a wall or window. This requires careful monitoring. Accurate feather trimming will balance advancing strength and skill levels with the slower speeds required for indoor flight. Babies that don't become good flyers often have weaning problems since flying skills are needed to forage for food in the wild. Parrots who cannot fly at this stage in their development become anxious and fearful. They may become fixated on a particular food, bowl or bowl placement. They may become

extremely phobic, nervous or self-mutilating.

Initially, puppies and birds vocalize because they need or want something. This notifies the care giver, whether the parents or the owner, to investigate and fix it. The puppy or bird may be cold, hot, hungry, hurt, frightened or lonely. For an animal to be left alone for a long time before it is able to care for itself is a very dangerous situation. If the parents are gone too long, the animal will starve to death -- if it's not some other animal's lunch first. It is up to us to respond appropriately. The correct response is to fix the problem — not to reward the cries, barks or screams. Giving the dog a biscuit and a pat on the head rewards the puppy. Running into the room yelling rewards the bird with your exciting return to the flock.

Parrots perceive yelling and screaming as a lovely way to communicate, expressing joy to the world. Birds can be trained to whistle or call their owners easier than they can be taught to scream. The screaming parrot gets a very mixed message from the owner. On one hand, he's rewarded by all the jumping around and yelling back, positive reinforcement from the bird's point of view. On the other hand, he knows that something terrible is wrong from other cues that the owner gives. Wanting reassurance and comfort, the bird screams more. This vicious circle results in confusion for the bird and hearing loss, neighbor complaints and frustration for the owner.

Like all infants, puppies and baby birds are designed by nature to be appealing. Infants require a lot of attention if they are to survive and prosper. They must be fed, kept at the optimum temperature, nurtured and educated. Part of the infant's education is how to be independent. Eventually, the goal of the caretaker is to work himself out of the job of parent and into the role of companion. Parrots have a much longer infancy and adolescence than dogs. This phase of a parrot's life, lasting several years in some species, allows for some unique opportunities. For one thing, it gives us time to correct some of the mistakes that may have been made earlier. It

also gives us the opportunity to make a lot more mistakes. It requires a long, long period of consistency, too. Fortunately, most parrots are very adaptable.

By following these common sense guidelines, puppies and parrots can grow up to achieve their wonderful pet potential. ➔

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