

The Parrot to Human Bond

by Sally Blanchard, Alameda, CA

Displacement Behavior

Most parrots can be devoted human companions because they are capable of forming such a strong bond with people. However, occasionally this very aspect which allows parrots to be good pets can create serious problems for both the owners and the parrot. Some parrots may become overly dependent or over bonded to their owners while others may develop such a strong protective sexual bond to one person they become aggressive to anyone else entering their perceived territory.

The parrot's potential to bond to people could be termed a displacement behavior. If an animal's natural behavior is blocked and that animal substitutes another behavior for what would be normal, it is called a displacement behavior. Certainly it is not natural for a parrot to bond to a human being. However, if another bird is not available and a care-giving human being is a constant in the parrot's life, the bird will most likely form a bond with that person. With nurturing guidance, proper care and adequate attention, a human bonded parrot can be content to be a lifelong companion.

Of course, it is a generalization to assume that all parrots form the same types of bonds within their groups or flocks. Some parrots naturally form stronger bonds with each other than others and their "style" of bonding may be reflected in the way certain species bond to their human friends. For example, Amazons and macaws, if allowed to, may form a strong exclusive bond with one person while an Alexandrine Parakeet or Eclectus may

be inclined to form a looser bond with several family members.

Some parrots who spend a great deal of time with other parrots may not form a strong bond with humans. Other parrots will still be tame with their owners even if they live with another parrot. It may depend on the amount of early and/or current interaction the parrot has with the people in its life. The species and gender of the parrots may also play an important part in maintaining an additional bond with its caregivers. There are always parrots who do not fit the stereotypical generalizations which seem to be so prevalent with companion parrots.

Knowing something about the basic concepts of bonding is important in understanding a parrot's relationship with its owner. One of the myths of parrot behavior is that a chick will not make a good human companion if it spends time with its natural parents, siblings, or other parrots, particularly after it opens its eyes. This is one of the justifications for raising babies in isolettes—totally isolated from other parrots. This concept is based on the erroneous belief that the first bond a parrot chick forms will be its lifelong bond. Parrots generally do not imprint in this manner but form social bonds which may change throughout their lives.

Imprinting And Social Bonding

Parrots are "altricial" which means they are hatched blind, naked, and totally dependent on their parents for their physical and "educational" needs until they have fledged, learned their social and survival skills, and become totally food independent. Ducks,

chickens, and quail are "precocial." They come out of the egg almost ready to go. Within a few hours, they are capable of a limited degree of self-care and are dependent on their parents for much less time than altricial birds. Some precocial birds imprint almost immediately on the first living creature they encounter—for these birds it is essential to their survival in the wild that they imprint on a parent or at least their own species.

While imprinting may be reversible in some cases, the lessons the young precocial chick first learns are most likely to influence his lifelong behavior. Imprinting usually occurs during a "window of time." In other words, if a young bird does not learn his important life lessons during a specific period, he may not be able to learn them at a later time.

While imprinting may play a significant part in some aspects of a young parrot's life (i.e. food preferences), in most species their social bonding does

With parrots, social bonding is gradual and certainly not "engraved in stone."

not appear to "engraved in stone." In other words, most parrots have a sense of their "parrotness" regardless of whether or not they were raised by people. A possible exception often mentioned may be cockatoos who have bonded strongly to people and may not accept a cockatoo mate if put in a breeding program. However, I do know of some former pet cockatoos who have later become successful parents.

Bonding And Rebonding

With parrots, social bonding is gradual and certainly not "engraved in stone." Most parrots have the potential to bond and rebond on different levels to different people (or birds) throughout their lives. The early bonds are with parents and clutchmates. These bonds are strong because the baby is totally dependent on its care takers for

everything and stays strong through fledging and food independence as the young parrot depends on its parents to teach the critical social and survival skills.

However, as the young parrot's world broadens, he or she may form looser bonds by interacting with other juveniles and perhaps even members of its parent's flock. The primary parent/chick bond must remain strong during the independence stages or the bird will not become secure as it matures. This is what I call the "am I OK?—yes, you're OK" stage of a young bird's life.

If the parrot is encouraged to explore, its sense of adventure will be encouraged. As young parrots begin to leave the continual guidance of their parents, they need reassurance they will be safe and secure in doing so. As young wild parrots begin to wander farther and farther from the safety of their parents, there is a great deal of calling back and forth. Although the sounds are natural parrot calls, essentially the conversation is "am I OK?—Yes, you're OK." If there is a threat or an uncertainty, the parent either joins the chick or sounds an alarm call for the chick to either freeze or return to the parent immediately. Without the parental reassurance, young birds would probably be much less likely to explore and be secure with their own sense of independence.

For example, this seems to be a needy time for many young companion parrots, particularly African Greys. If their primary person (or a person they know well and trust) is not available or unable to provide reassurance during this stage, there appears to be an increased chance the parrot will become overdependent and even phobic with feather picking as one of the possible behavioral symptoms. Because young parrots are actually very dependent during the time they are struggling to become independent, I encourage people not to go on vacation and leave their young parrots from the ages of about four to eight months with medium size parrots and 10 to 15 months with the large macaws. These ages are not absolute and may vary according to species and individual personality.

A Confusing Time For The Human Flock

This period of growing independence, with its mixed messages from the parrot, can be very confusing to parrot owners. While at times their young parrots appear to be very needy, there are other times when they seem to want nothing to do with their surrogate parents. This is also the time when behavioral dysfunctions

begin to emerge. The resulting behavioral problems may have had their origin in poor early socialization and/or lack of behavioral guidance but they will only become obvious when a young parrot, improperly prepared for independence, struggles to achieve that independence.

When I explain this concept, I like to put it in human terms so people can better understand—how many human

CéDé

BIRD FOODS

The World's Most Renown Supplement for Breeding, Conditioning and Special Treat

CéDé is sold in 40 countries through 25 main distributors scattered over five continents, a fact which speaks for itself. CéDé nestling foods are made with egg crumbs, whole grain crumbs, honeys, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, all laboratory balanced, which makes the mixes indispensable for daily feeding, breeding pairs, during moulting time and as treat or snack. CéDé comes in five different formulas, depending on the type of birds you will be feeding.

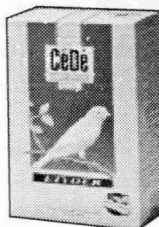
WHY USE CéDé FOODS?

Animal protein (eggs) has a high biological value (VERY IMPORTANT WHEN BREEDING BIRDS) as well as carbohydrates and lipids. A stock of amino acids and phosphorus is a prime importance even more than calcium and fat. It must be well balanced with vitamins and, never to be forgotten, precious minerals, which will give excellent results in breeding, growing, plumage, in other words a beautiful finished specimen. Isn't it a good reason to use only the best? ... CéDé

CéDé Eggfood

for canaries and finches
and general use

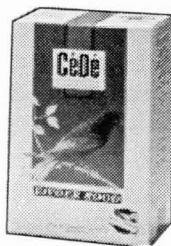
1 kilo box (2.2 lbs.) 12 per case
1 Kg. box \$5.30 + shipping



CéDé Parkieten

for Budgies and Hookbills

1 kilo box (2.2 lbs.) 12 per case
1 Kg. box \$5.30 + shipping



CéDé Eggfood Red

Color enhancer for more colorful Canaries
and other birds such as Goulds.

1 kilo box (2.2 lbs.) 12 per case
1 Kg. box \$6.25 + shipping

CéDé Mix for Parrots

500 grams (1.1 lbs.)

10 per case

500 gr. \$4.80 + shipping



CéDé Universal for Softbills

fruit/insect eaters.

1 kilo box (2.2 lbs.) 6 per case

1 Kg. box \$5.50 + shipping

8.8 lbs. aluminum bag

\$18.00 + shipping

CéDé Handfeeding for Baby birds

(Maybe used for Lorikeets)

500 grams (1.1 lbs.) 10 per case

500 gr. box \$4.70 + shipping



Visa • Master Card or AMEX orders are shipped within 24 hours

SUNSHINE BIRD SUPPLIES

A Division of The Higgins Group Corp.

8535 NW 56th Street • Miami, FL 33166

Ph: (305) 593-2666 • Fax: (305) 591-9567

AFA Watchbird advertisers represent some of the best in the business. When you buy from these fine sources, be sure to tell them you saw their ad in Watchbird!

babies do you know who are juvenile delinquents? Although parrots are not and should not be thought of as human children, there are a great number of similarities in their early stage development.

One of the greatest mixed messages that a young parrot seems to send out when it is becoming independent is, "I

Although parrots are not and should not be thought of as human children, there are a great number of similarities in the early stage development.

need you—leave me alone." Even though a companion parrot is naturally striving to become independent, it will always remain dependent on its human caregivers. This can create conflicting behaviors for young birds. At the time when they would be breaking away from their natural parents, the human caretaker is still encouraging a strong bond. In some cases, the owners have actually done very little to encourage emotional or physical independence. This may cause serious behavioral problems with some species who naturally have either a very loose or absent parent/chick bond as they reach their independence.

In some cases, I believe severe phobic behavior towards the primary person may result if the bird is overdependent. This may be a reason some Rose-breasted Cockatoos exhibit such erratic behavior at about eight to 10 months. In the wild, Galah chicks are weaned in a communal creche (nursery). After weaning, they form a loosely bonded juvenile flock with no interaction with the parents or the adult flock. It seems to me if owners push a strong bond with one of these cockatoos at this age, it can cause tremendous conflict with the bird's natural behavioral stages. Not enough is known of the natural behaviors of most parrot species in the wild to determine if this could be a causative factor in their phobic behavior and/or

tendency to strongly reject the person they have had the strongest bond with.

Changes In The Bond

Since it is natural for there to be changes in the intensity of a parrot's bond to its human caregivers, it is important for us to respond in positive ways. I have heard the words "my parrot used to love me and now he hates me" or "my parrot suddenly turned mean" so many times.

The change in the relationship has nothing to do with a parrot hating its previously beloved owner or becoming mean. With a young bird particularly, it may be the natural time for a lessening of the bond. Another aspect of a changing bond is when the parrot transfers its bond from its primary caretaker to someone who is less involved. How does an owner deal with these periods of time when a parrot's bond is either lessening or even shifting to another family member?

The key is to be patient, consistent and not try to force the bird to like you. If the bird will still allow the owner or someone else to handle him, he or she should be taken into a neutral area. Working with your parrot in a neutral room will keep him from becoming cage bound and help him to focus on the person he is with without having to be "on duty" around his perceived territory. He should be placed on the bed, couch, or a stand and the person who is feeling "neglected" should just spend time with him, talking, singing, playing. At this point, he should be allowed to be in control of what he is comfortable with. As the bird gradually becomes more responsive, the person can slowly start to establish the tools of Nurturing Guidance.

Playing House

Sometime during adolescence, before he or she actually reaches sexual maturity, the parrot will most likely "play at" mating behavior. With human children, we call it "playing house." This is often a time when bird owners become very confused by their bird's behavior. The bird may be regurgitating, wing quivering, head bobbing, or foot stomping long before

he or she would actually be ready to breed. Some of this mock "sexual behavior" can be leftover feeding responses. This is especially true with parrots who have been deprived of food to force wean them before they would naturally be ready to wean. People who lack knowledge about food-related behaviors may respond to incessant food begging with handling or affection rather than feeding the chick. This often results in insecure parrots who exhibit feeding response behaviors long after they are weaned. The owner can help their parrot's sense of security by feeding soft warm globs of food with their fingers even if the bird is eating on his own.

Nurturing Guidance

I recently talked with the owner of a two year old African Grey who was becoming a bit aggressive and was exhibiting what she was sure was sexual behavior. After all, she had already been told by half a dozen people that

...you are only as good as your last "UP" command.

her pet was sexually mature and probably needed to be in a breeding program. What absolute nonsense! The Grey was just "practicing what would come naturally in a natural setting" and the aggression was based more on the fact that she had gotten sloppy with using rules in handling her parrot. She just needed to start working with him to reinforce her nurturing guidance—you are only as good as your last "UP" command.

If a parrot has been raised with the "UP" and "DOWN" commands and the owner gets lazy with them, it is not unusual for parrots to start testing—almost as if to demand that their owner use them again. I believe one of the few parrot behavioral absolutes is: Parrots will bond most strongly to the person who provides them with the clearest guidance.

Over the years I have worked with several couples who have not understood why their bird bonded more strongly to one person and not the

other or why the bird suddenly shifted its bond. A classic example involved a couple who purchased a Blue and Gold Macaw as a weaned juvenile. The man loved to rough house with the macaw on the floor but never bothered to work with the bird or use the "UP" and "DOWN" commands. To him the macaw was his buddy and there was no reason to set rules, give him verbal commands, or do anything but play wrestle and have a good time. The woman was the parrot's surrogate parent and primary caretaker and as long as the macaw was comfortable with the "loose sibling playmate" bond he had with the man, everything was fine.

However, at about a year and a half the macaw began to reject the man and form a much stronger bond with the woman again. She was the one who had provided the guidance, set the rules, and gave the bird clear messages about what was expected from him. Consequently, the macaw was far less confused by her than the man who just wanted to have fun.

The Reality Of Sexual Maturity

Most people who have parrots have only had them for a few years and many people are quite apprehensive that their parrot will become some sort of raving blood thirsty monster when he becomes sexual mature. Actually, if people have done a good job setting a foundation of positive interaction with their parrot, sexual maturity should not be a big problem. Once parrots are sexually mature, they will be sexually mature for the rest of their lives. It is not something they get over. This does not mean they can not remain a good pet. It simply means that there may be a few times a year when a parrot may be more difficult to get along with. Sexual maturity certainly does not mean the parrot has to go into a breeding program. Parrots are not just simply two-dimensional sexual animals. There are many aspects to their personalities and the people who raise their parrots with Nurturing Guidance rarely have serious behavioral problems.

Over-dependent parrots who are allowed to overbond with one person and are dominant in their relationship

with that person are more likely to create serious problems for the people in their lives when they become sexually mature. It is not funny when a mature parrot chases another family member around the house trying to do bodily harm. Nor is it amusing when they are sitting on their primary person's shoulder and bite their face when another person comes in the room. These are often behaviors of an overbonded parrot who perceives himself as his owner's sexual partner.

In a positive relationship with a parrot, the primary person establishes himself or herself as the dominant partner in the pair bond. Consequently, they rarely experience sexual aggressive behavior since the parrot defers to their dominance and is less likely to initiate sexual behavior. Without realizing it, people may actually be increasing the sexual behavior of their parrots with physical affection that may be misunderstood as sexual "foreplay."

During the times hormones are

Complete Bird Care from Hatchling to Maturity!

**FREE
Full-Color
Catalog!**



Outstanding, 48-page, color bird supply catalog offering thousands of items at affordable prices!

Give your bird quality products at unbelievable savings by shopping at home with **Pet Warehouse**. We also offer **FREE** catalogs for dogs/cats/small animals and fish/reptiles, too. So, please specify what type of pet(s) you own with your request. Call or write today!

PET WAREHOUSE • 1 (800) 443-1160

Dept. AF-34 • P.O. Box 310 • Xenia, OH 45385

exerting a strong influence on our feathered companions, interactions which would normally be perfectly fine and should cause no problem may cause sexual arousal and serious confusion in our pets. During these periods, in many birds, it may be best to avoid petting under the wing, pulling on the tail, encompassing the body, and pressure on the back or rump area, touching near the vent, and beak wrestling.

Hormonally-influenced, strongly bonded parrots may try to initiate copulation by rubbing their vent on their owner's hand, leg, etc. When this occurs I advise my clients to return their parrots to a T-stand or their cage without making a fuss. This form of sexual behavior in companion parrots is a displacement substitute for natural biological behaviors and should not be punished. It should essentially be ignored and neither encouraged nor discouraged. It is best not to encourage sexual bonding from our companion parrots.

A Lifelong Bond

Well-cared for parrots can live a very long life and with proper care and guidance can remain contented human companions. Owners should expect changes in the level of bonding during their lifetime with a parrot. I have lived with my African Grey, Bongo Marie for almost 20 years. My life has had its ups and downs. There

have been times when I could not give her everything she needed to keep her happy. She has been sullen with me and not friendly to me at all. She has become good friends with other people and there have been times I thought she didn't like me anymore. But all I had to do to get her back on my side was to slow myself down and start paying attention to her again. She comes right back to me emotionally and we become good friends again.

There are many variables which can influence and even override the natural tendencies in parrots. With handfed babies, early socialization can have a tremendous impact on whether a parrot will form a strong bond. Socialization is not just the number of birds or people the young bird relates to in its early development. It is the process by which young animals learn their social and survival skills. Poorly socialized chicks raised in production type aviaries may not be able to form a trusting bond with anyone, parrot or human because they have not been exposed to nurturing.

On the other hand, many young parrots will be able to bond with another parrot or a person if they have been properly socialized—whether the nurturing has come from their natural parents or human surrogates. The myth that a person has to handfeed their baby parrot for it to bond to them is nonsense. This myth is often responsible for a great deal of pain and suffering for both the new owner and the baby bird who may be unintentionally fed and weaned in a depriving manner. The truth is, once a young bird forms a trusting bond with its hand-feeder(s), that bond can easily be transferred to any caring person who has learned how to handle it comfortably.

Evidence From Parent-raised Birds

For years, I tamed wild-caught parrots (including my own Grey, Bongo Marie) and many of them, if they were properly tamed and nurtured, formed a strong bond with their human caretakers. For a parrot to form a trusting bond, the key is not whether the bird was raised by its natural parents or by humans. The important factor is that the young parrot was well-socialized.

While I am certainly not advocating importation of parrots for the pet-trade, it is my belief that a well-socialized wild-caught young parrot raised in the wild by its parents—particularly an African Grey—will make a better human companion than a poorly socialized, production-raised domestic bird. It is logical that if many wild-caught parrots transitioned successfully to pet status, then a domestic parent raised parrot can also be a good pet. However, it will take more work and a basic knowledge of taming techniques.

Gender Confusion?

Another myth that makes no sense whatsoever to me presumes female birds will naturally bond to men and male birds will naturally bond to females. This is absurd. I do not believe there is such thing as a man's bird or a woman's bird. I believe parrots form the strongest bonds with people who have a steady and calm demeanor. This does not mean the person doesn't get excited when they are playing. Parrots love high-energy play but they also want someone who provides clear behavioral messages. Baby parrots and even adult parrots could care less whether we are female or male as long as they are treated with care. It is ludicrous to suggest that our gender matters even as the parrot becomes sexually mature and perhaps, thinks of us as its mate. In some cases, in captivity, it does not even seem to matter to a parrot if another parrot is the opposite sex. It appears that some people regard parrots only as breeding animals with few other important behaviors in their lives.

Even if there is a tendency for a particular bird to bond to gender it is most familiar with, it is certainly not ingrained in stone. I have worked with people who have purchased previously owned birds who have been labeled "a man's bird" or "a woman's bird" and with proper handling techniques and consistency, these birds have formed strong bonds to people of the other gender. It is true parrots will more easily form a bond with people who have similarities to the people they are familiar with. For example, a parrot who has been owned by a blond woman may exhibit more enthusiasm



**Lima's Exotic
Birds**

exclusively

Caiques

babies from
many blood lines

(818) 703-1112


Ralph Lima
P.O. Box 6496
Woodland Hills, CA 91365

towards other blond women. This certainly does not mean the parrot will not eventually bond to a woman with black hair or a bald man.

I have often been asked if parrots form a lifelong monogamous bond like humans do. The answer is yes, just like humans do. The vast majority of companion parrots are capable of bonding on different levels to different people throughout their lives. Some companion parrots do have a tendency to form a strong, one-person bond. This does not mean the strong-one person bond is absolute. There are several ways to work with parrots to encourage them to bond on different levels with more than one parson.

Having several people, particularly the people involved in the bird's life, handle him frequently both in groups and individually can do a great deal to prevent a parrot from becoming a one-person bird. Single bird owners should try to involve as many friends and relatives in their parrot's life as possible. However, often just setting rules and providing guidance so the parrot looks to its owner for behavioral guidance can reduce aggression towards new people a great deal.

Unfortunately, many of the bonding myths become self-fulfilling prophecies when people believe they are true. If the owner of a young Double Yellow-headed Amazon is told enough times their parrot will be a one-person bird, he or she may simply believe there is nothing that can be done to prevent or change that kind of behavior and the belief is perpetuated.

Because parrots are intelligent animals, it is possible to teach them new behaviors. Although there may be fairly predictable species characteristics, it is important to realize that many exceptions are possible. These exceptions may involve the individual personality of each parrot. But a parrot's behavior is influenced even more by an owner who has good behavioral information and applies it to create the best pet possible. Because parrots are so capable of learning, they are often quite flexible in adapting their behaviors for life as a human companion. However, it is critical that they have a good teacher! 

From the AFA Annual Conference Proceedings, 1996

Breeding the Five-colored Nun

by Alvin & Dixie Lea, Hanford, CA

[Note: This article has been submitted as part of the nomination procedure for a U.S. First Breeding Award. Anyone having good evidence of a successful breeding of this species prior to the dates noted in this article, please notify the AFA Business Office in Phoenix, Arizona.]

Sometime in January or February 1991, my wife Dixie and I took a trip to a quarantine station in San Gabriel, California operated by Sigie Meyer of S E Birds to get some finches. Once we were there Sigie caught the finches on our list, which included Five-colored Nuns. Dixie and I were looking at the Tri-colored Nuns and were about to change our minds when Sigie told us the Five-colored Nuns were rare and he did not know when or if he would ever have them again. So we kept them.

Once we got the finches home we had them quarantined in a heated room as they had been kept in a heated room at S E Birds. We kept them inside until May 1991 before putting them in an outdoor flight. We did not want a late cold spell to get them.

That summer and winter the finches survived outside but produced nothing. In March of 1992 we were checking finch boxes, cleaning, and putting in new nest material. The Five-colored Nuns had four eggs in a bare box, with no nesting material. Dixie took the eggs out and made a nice nest for the birds. I told her the Nuns would not go back into the nest box. Fortunately, however, they did and within seven days they had four babies. The Nuns did not seem to mind us checking the box and handling the babies. We got the babies closed banded with NFSS bands.

Later that year the pair had three clutches for a total of 10 babies. Also in the flight with them was a pair of Melbas and they seemed to get along.

The finches are housed in an inside/outside aviary which is 4 x 8 ft. and 7 ft. high and attached to a build-

ing that contains the inside portion of the aviaries. The finches are kept here year around with no heat. The inside flight is 3 x 4 ft. and that is where the nest boxes are located. I used a standard finch box 5 x 5 x 5 inches. The nest boxes are hung about 5 feet above the ground. On the wall between the inside and outside of the flights there is a 1 x 1 ft. opening which is open year round to give the birds access to both portions of the flights. Also located on this wall is a 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 ft. window which is covered with plastic during the winter. We keep feed and water inside and out all year.

In the summer time they are fed mostly in the outside containers, and in the winter time they are mostly fed from the inside to protect the feed from the rain and fog. The feed is a standard finch mix, a vegetable mix, and also an egg food. We make enough of the vegetable mix for a four to five day supply and keep it in the refrigerator. We also feed it to our hookbills. The vegetable mix is fed every day with Super Preen sprinkled on it. The egg food is fed during breeding only.

We mix the following vegetables in equal parts: broccoli, celery, carrots, and spinach leaves which are then run through a Sunbeam Little Oskar until they are in bite size pieces. It is mixed together with corn kernels—the corn being for our hookbills.

The following dry ingredients are mixed in equal parts. Wheat germ, High Protein baby cereal, rolled oats, and wheat bread crumbs. We boil eggs for 20 minutes. We add two finely grated eggs per 2 cups of dry mix. Then add one half a package of Knox unflavored gelatin per 2 cups of the above mix. To get the wheat bread crumbs we buy wheat bread then toast it, let it dry, and run it through a hand meat grinder. We make large portions of dry mix, and we add eggs and gelatin when we need more mix. 