

# the "New and Improved" Baby Parrot

*Improving Your Product Through  
Socialization & Environmental Enrichment*

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## Introduction

**P**sitacine aviculture has come an extraordinary distance in the last twenty years. Volumes of excellent information have been gained about nutrition, nestbox design, incubation, embryonic and neonatal development and mortality, handfeeding, growth rates, and pediatric avian medicine. Thousands of baby parrots are entering the pet trade yearly, and birds have become the #3 small animal pet. Parrot ownership, once considered eccentric, is now considered almost ordinary.

As a lay behaviorist or parrot behavior consultant, I get calls daily from owners whose parrots have developed

behavior problems that threaten their future as a pet, or who wish to "get rid of" a parrot who has not worked out in their environment. I have years of experience in caring for parrot babies and handfeeding multiple species from day one on up, but I am not an aviculturist. I started working with behavior problems in parrots over a decade ago, thanks to the human-parrot problems I encountered working as an avian technician — and those problems are getting worse, not better.

There is a terrifying trend developing with psittacine ownership in this country — the concept of the disposable parrot. Adoption agencies have existed for at least a decade, with caring individuals trying to place parrots in new households when the first home was unsuccessful. However, in the last five years, parrot sanctuaries have sprung up all over this country in an attempt to provide a haven for the growing numbers of parrots that cannot be placed in pet or breeding environments.

The fact that sanctuaries are filling a desperate need undermines the entire concept of parrots being good companions. One of the fundamental appeals of parrots for the true animal lover is not their beauty or talking ability — it's their longevity. One only need bury one beloved but shortlived animal like a dog or a cat, and the thought of a psittacine replacement becomes extremely appealing. After all, a long life span means they won't die on us! So what good is that long life span, if it becomes so impossible to live with a parrot when it gets older?

According to statistics, behavior problems are the #1 cause of death in pet dogs — greater than all medical problems combined. Large numbers of canines are being euthanized daily in

humane societies and ASPCAs because no one wants them any more. In the world of captive parrots, euthanasia is not a common answer for behavior problems — yet. The same groundwork has been laid for parrots, and it is imperative that we change our approach to raising them. These birds are a limited resource that is too precious to waste.

## Future Estimations

As I understand it, PIJAC has projections that indicate that the numbers of birds owned will increase considerably faster than the numbers of bird owners, estimating within a few years that the average bird owner will increase the number of their flock to six. This indicates a growing need to truly satisfy the bird-buying public long term so they will return to the same aviculturists and retailers to purchase more birds. Therefore, customer satisfaction will be vital.

Now is the time for aviculture to start focusing, not on quantity, but on improving the psychological quality of baby parrots, thereby giving the buyer the very best start at parrot ownership. This will substantially decrease the likelihood of baby parrots growing up and losing their homes. An unhappy foray into parrot ownership hurts the entire industry — it sullies the appeal of parrots as companion animals, thereby reducing the pool of potential buyers. Conversely, the more satisfied the buyers, the more likely that they will return repeatedly to the original source, not only to purchase food and toys, but also to acquire additional birds. As we all know, most happy parrot owners are incapable of stopping at one bird!

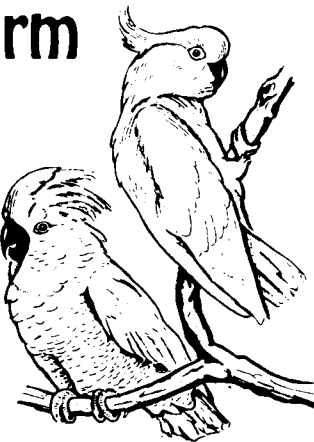
## Cross Species Parallels?

Psychological studies done with primates have proven that there is more to raising the young of intelligent species than simply providing a good diet and adequate veterinary care. It has been proven that a stimulating environment is vital to the mental development in human babies — the use of bright colors and designs on nursery walls and colorful mobiles are a couple of examples. Since parrots are ranked on the same level of intelli-

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gence as a five year old child, it requires no great stretch of the imagination to assume the same sort of stimulation influences the psychological development of the baby parrot.

### More Work?

To an aviculturist who is barely scratching along financially, the idea of adding more work to an already incredibly busy day is not one to be met with great favor. However, these techniques need not add huge amounts of time and expense to the raising of happy, well-socialized parrots. Instead, they offer the potential of increased income for the parties concerned, as satisfied customers return and tell all their friends. After all, a happy parrot owner is the best advertisement for parrot ownership, and an unhappy one is the worst.

### Environmental Enrichment

A variety of inexpensive materials can be used for environmental enrichment. For example, instead of a sterile white environment, aviculturists and handfeeders can add color in a variety of ways. If babies are raised in opaque plastic tubs, then they have nothing at which to look. This lack of visual stimulation can be counteracted by cutting a notch in the side of the tub, and melting the edges so they are not sharp. Now, the babies can see out. Better than plastic containers, however, are organic ones, such as simple cardboard boxes (which can be easily cut to provide a view, and disposed of when soiled), or the Eb Cravens technique of raising babies in baskets.

Borrowing again from early development of more extensively studied species, it is fair to assume the existence of a window of opportunity with the development of visual skills in psittacids. To therefore make the view more interesting, one can hang bright posters on the walls and add plants (either real or artificial) to the nursery. Personnel can be encouraged to wear bright colors when working with babies (but avoiding, of course, t-shirts with pictures of large predatory birds on them). Phoebe Linden suggests the use of colorful towels in a variety of patterns for covering the containers at night. By rotating the towels every

couple of days, caretakers can ensure the babies become accustomed to different patterns and colors. In this manner, an early foundation is laid that encourages the birds to be receptive to change. The edges of the containers can be decorated with snatches of colorful fabrics and greens, hung with clothespins. Food skewers are handy for not only hanging food — preferably in large clumps — but also for hanging chewable toys such as empty cardboard towel rolls and small boxes. Please note that food is used as inexpensive decorations and toys long before babies have developed the muscular coordination to start eating on their own.

Single chicks can be given a cuddle toy to snuggle with, such as colorful cotton towels rolled up and tied with string or rubber bands. Dollar Stores™ (or their financial equivalents) can provide inexpensive plastic baby toys that intrigue young parrots.

### Transitioning to Cages

When babies graduate from containers to cages, environmental enrichment should continue. Cages can be covered with bright patterned towels, again rotated to provide interest. Greens can be woven through cage bars, and chunks of bright foods stuck between the wires. If there are concerns about cleanliness, toys can be either disposable or capable of undergoing sterilization (i.e. Perma Play™ toys—expensive initially, but from my experience, virtually indestructible and therefore, a good investment).

### Baby Handling

In humans, children not cuddled and nurtured develop a condition known as “failure to thrive.” This results in serious psychological as well as physical problems, such as stunted growth, the inability to socialize, and increased potential for self-destructive behaviors later in life. The possible parallels to parrots are too obvious to be ignored. We have all seen the increasing numbers of stunted psittacines, birds that don't know how to play and cuddle, and parrots that get into feather destruction and self-mutilation later on. What if these increasing problems are related to a

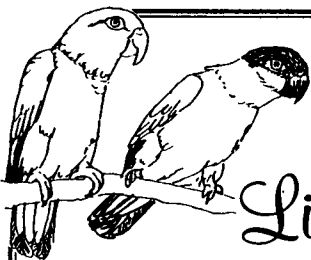
cold, clinical nursery?

If so, perhaps even large facilities can make adjustments that will alleviate this problem perhaps by enlisting the aid of neighbors, friends, the elderly, and even local scout troops. (Think of the new merit badges they could earn.) Who knows, maybe with a little training, they might volunteer to assist aviculturists with the laborious and unrewarding task of cuddling babies.

### Building a Psychologically Healthy and Loving Foundation

Handfeeders should not fear that their charges will “bond” to them — a well-socialized baby should form loving relationships with any number of people around them. This lays the groundwork for strong, psychologically healthy, loving bonds to be formed throughout the parrot's life. To encourage these positive connections is therefore critical to successful relationships in the future.

From earliest interactions, personnel should try to replicate conditions in the nest. Parent parrots spend large amounts of time with their faces close



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to their babies. As Linden puts it, this is not an animal with a breast or udder — this is an animal that interacts facially with its offspring. Consequently, handfeeders should put their faces down close to a chick for as little as 30 seconds after each feeding, and touch the chicks all over their bodies. One animal trainer has commented that it is unnatural for a bird to have its back touched, and that we humans should not expect to have that kind of interaction with a parrot. Perhaps he has not experienced the extraordinary sight of baby parrots freshly pulled from their parents' nest with not a speck of food or dirt anywhere on their bodies. Parrot parents groom their babies all over and so should the handlers in the nursery. Each baby should be cupped in warm hands after every feeding, and stroked all over, touching every part of their body.

Equally important to physical handling is verbal communication. Once again, looking to the behaviors of parent birds, it is obvious that verbal communication starts early. Consequently, handfeeders should be encouraged to

talk constantly to the babies in their care, thus accustoming them to our language from earliest memory. Varieties of other types of sounds are also healthy and useful. The positive aspects of music have been proven repeatedly with animals as well as people; Jim Murphy of White Mountain Bird Farm takes this a step further, also using talk radio to accustom his babies to a variety of voices.

#### **Up and Down Training**

Training young parrots to step up and down on command is incredibly easy, and having babies already trained prior to sale makes the transition to another human, especially an inexperienced one, that much easier and trauma-free. I can't count the number of times I have been called in to help new parrot owners who don't have an inkling how to even pick up their new pet. Needless to say, this situation does not start the new relationship off on a good foot. By saying "up" or "step up" each time one picks up a baby — even long before babies are old enough to perch, and "down"


when the baby is put down, they quickly learn to associate those words with the specific actions. Used in this manner, the birds will already be trained to fundamental commands that can then easily be taught to new owners on purchase, thereby enabling them to handle their new acquisitions with confidence from Day One. Dr. April Romagnano of the Avicultural Breeding and Research Center commented that simply teaching the up command improved their babies.

#### **Preparing for the Future**

Aviculturists and pet store employees should teach babies behaviors that will increase the potential for success in their future homes, and strictly avoid allowing behaviors that do the opposite. Often, human practices can inadvertently set baby parrots up for problems in their future homes. Examples would include carrying babies around all day, allowing them to shoulder, and never expecting them to spend time in their cages, except at night. These permissive actions will lay the foundation for serious, home-threatening behavior problems in the future. Consequently, purchase of "the staff's favorite baby in the store" can be a sad mistake.

#### **Conclusions**

By improving the quality of the babies they produce, aviculturists can increase their profits over the long term. After all, when an aviary gets a reputation for producing wonderful, mentally stable chicks, that aviary will attract both repeat and new customers.

Quality can be improved through providing a more stimulating nursery environment, increasing visual, tactile, and verbal communication, and teaching simple commands. Through attention to socialization, behavior modification and environmental enrichment, aviculturists and handfeeders can make a substantial difference in the future of the parrots they produce, helping to ensure the formation of a life-long positive parrot-human relationship. Baby parrots who are raised in this manner will be more trusting and adaptable, shifting easily to new environments and bonding strongly with new owners — and nothing could be more beneficial for the industry. 



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