

Baby Psychology

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As a result of over a decade of private practice and the development of a format for preventive medical management program for individual pet bird owners and aviculturists alike, the following information is presented as a means of effective disease prevention. Just as surely as our nation has come to recognize that the fundamental origin of problems in society have their roots in child care, the development of infant and juvenile baby birds' minds and bodies is the key to lifelong success.

What could be simpler, more natural and cost effective than setting the stage for the life of a baby during its sensitive and critical early months, when both mind and tissues are readily influenced for their long journey ahead? It has proven to be an irrelevant matter as to how long a psittacine's potential life span is if it is cut short by poor care due to lack of education on the part of the owner. Unfortunately, the reality remains that the numbers of pet and aviary birds over ten years of age remains well under ten percent of all patients seen in practice. This means that all of the remaining patients in the United States are under ten years old despite a massive number of birds being imported during the last 20 years.

A second phenomena that bears a great deal of attention by the bird owning public for the benefit of long term bird survival is the emergence

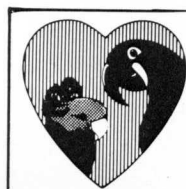
of a new type of patient trend noted by avian veterinarians. The previously mentioned ten percent or so that comprise older bird patients are starting to force us to acknowledge that the subject of geriatric psittacine medicine has yet to receive the attention that it now deserves. This is due to the lack of appreciable patient numbers prior to this, but these patients have unusually large numbers of cancer, heart disease, arteriosclerosis, atherosclerosis, kidney failure, degenerative arthritis and liver failure. The figures reflect the very same trend that we noted occurring in the early 1970s when veterinarians began seeing fat dogs and cats with back disorders, hip arthritis and cardiac problems. This trend of discovering newly identified diseases could have been due to better medical and laboratory equipment that allowed for the diagnosis of hidden diseases or due to the fact that perhaps more dog and cat owners were actually going to the vet (yes, at one time it was actually an unusual thing for these pets to go to the vet on a regular basis - just like pet birds of today). The vast majority of the heart and degenerative disease conditions were found to be a result of more and more dogs and cats living in smaller yards or houses, eating rich table foods and exercising less. Farm dogs rarely were obesity victims, but the term "condo-body" truly came into its own in the late 1970s. This should not be much of a surprise if one only looks where those pets' owners are living, what they are eating and their own medical problems. Unfortunately, the same grim specter is raising its ugly head in our pet and aviary birds.

More of a good thing is not necessarily a benefit when it comes to over crowding, French fries, rock music and fast track corporate life styles for anyone in the household. Too many vitamins, too much monkey biscuit, too many clutches, too many visitors and too many birds in one home does not make for a stable environment. If cancer is a breakdown of the immune

system, as is proposed by the leading researchers of our time, and the health of the immune system is based on genetics, nutrition and stress levels, is it any surprise that malignant tumors are manifesting in our parrots? At one time, cancer was considered a rare find indeed in large breed psittacines. Maybe we should pay closer attention to the source of these problems than the massively expensive and punishing process of repairing these little friends that are merely a reflection of the environment in which we put ourselves. There is no better place to start this preventive effort than the first day of a new bird's existence and the following suggestions and observations are freely offered in an effort to keep you and your bird out of the veterinarian's office at essentially no cost to you or your bird.

The three fundamental cornerstones of a sound preventive pediatric medical program are proper nutrition, sanitation and psychological security for proper development. Traditionally, both the owner and the veterinarian have embraced tunnel vision when confronted with pediatric disease, and the tendency is to pursue laboratory diagnostics and drug use to cure the variety of conditions seen, such as stunted growth, diarrhea, feather picking and self trauma, which are often really the side effect of improper home management and a lack of understanding of normal baby development.

Psittacine babies are extremely curious, receptive and reactive to events around them and depend on a constant exposure to stimuli to achieve proper development. They are similar in their emotional development to an age equivalent to a two or three year old child. They are mentally bright in comparison to other pet species seen in practice, such as galliformes and anseriforms, and possess the mental capability of a two to six year old child, depending on the species and brain size. They are, therefore, highly capable of rapid information assessment and active learning and tend to reflect the level of their environment and its challenges. The great debate that persists over whether spoon fed or syringe fed babies are better socialized is so simplistic that it denies the extent of the vast number of aspects that go into the interpretation of the world and how it relates to his survival.



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It is the owners who are responsible for the cultivation of the baby's potential and it is up to them and their efforts that are required to enrich the process. Locking a baby up in a cage for eight to ten hours each day and scolding them for being hyperactive or rowdy is no more productive than punishing children that cry to be held after lying in a crib unattended all day. The end result of these all too common circumstances is later expressed as intense psychological stress. This abnormal process is then interpreted by the baby's body and is expressed as a purely physical disease that becomes visible to the clinician well into the process. The intimate relationship between psychological health and physical well being is a powerful one and an under used vehicle for supportive healing of ill youngsters. It is critical to devote a portion of the well baby check-up or office call time to baby mental health needs. Veterinarians seeing large numbers of birds are now stating that bird behavioral problems are becoming equally as important as infectious disease presentations and, in fact, are often the underlying cause of recurring infectious illnesses. It is well known that the number one complaint of cat owners is for behavioral problems, as they are truly family members in today's complex and intense society. When confronted with a problem in a baby bird, it is important first to establish a long term history background from the owner including:

- original purpose of ownership — (why did you want this bird).
- primary owner versus primary care giver - (who "owns" the bird) and who really takes care of it each day).
- role of the bird in household — (pet, singer, ornament, breeder)
- state of development including any sexual activity, assertion of dominance, etc. — (how old is the bird and what is going on at home).
- diet - (in detail).
- daily sanitation efforts (who cleans, what, when and how).
- post disease history (vet visits, all diagnosis and treatments).
- self destructive behaviors — (chewing, feather pulling, skin picking, screaming, etc.).
- opportunity for stimulation (toys, play therapy, playmates, T.V., windows, etc.).

This point is further highlighted in that nearly all urban demographic

studies predict that handfed, psittacine bird ownership will continue to rise through this decade, as working couples opt for less children, living space decreases, adults remain single longer, but want a parental relationship and daily stresses continue to escalate. The problems seen on patient presentation will also escalate, particularly in the form of abandonment and over indulgent behavior problems, as owners with no previous child experience or insufficient free time will attempt to parent intelligent, large psittacine babies without proper bird education or knowledge of where to get help.

The items that demand effective communication during the baby check-ups by the avian veterinarian are:

Psittacine birds are social creatures:

Babies bond with humans for instinctual reasons and need visual, verbal and physical contact many times every day for a balanced development. Denial of physical contact often leads to frantic behavior (anxiety disorders based in fears of abandonment). Psittacine babies bond for reasons of survival in the flock, not out of personal preference. To deny a baby quality time, stroking, holding or playtime is to deny his existence. The baby's interpretation is that either it has been abandoned, and abandoned wild babies are killed by predators, or it is at risk of being abandoned due to some defect or disease it does not understand. It is a well documented fact that human babies who are disciplined too strictly or punished before they understand right from wrong are prone to fits of uncontrollable rage later in life. These individuals often

go on to develop criminal or violent behaviors when the cause is unrecognized and unaddressed. This is also true of the untamable "bronco" bird. The real cause is often forgotten and invisible. Babies that are not picked up, touched and held are extremely prone to uncontrollable fear, anxiety and panic, even if their adult home is well managed.

The baby is a barometer of its environment:

Babies react to situations. They are incapable of higher thought as infants and do not work on their own to create conditions of frustration, fear, anger or mistrust by intent. Many times the stimulus is the owner's body language, tone of voice or human family interaction which the owners may not be aware of, but the baby picks up on easily. Be sensitive to your baby bird's attitude when he reacts to your facial expression, touch and voice.

Babies experience and require a progressive involvement in the four main areas of development:

Total dependency — before the baby can eat, walk, clean themselves or fly.

Partial independence — starting to walk, learning to pick up food.

Assertion of independence — learning to fly, weaning, becoming a juvenile.

Self sufficiency — juvenile period moving into young adulthood.

To accelerate, retard or deny any one of these periods at any time can result in extreme behavior disorders upon reaching juvenile age or sexual maturation status, at which point it is very difficult to correct them in any short time span. Remember, these four stages are compressed into five

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or six months for a grass parakeet and eight or ten months in a large macaw. Children take at least 18 years to accomplish the same advancement with constant care and guidance.

Birds are never "good" or "bad." They are merely wild animals that have been domestically propagated, not domesticated, and the enforcement of human perceptions or emotions by owners or breeders onto the baby is not only unrealistic, but can be highly detrimental. This often explains why a bird has become a screamer, biter, runs away or panics upon approach. Psychosomatic illness often accompanies the behavior problems, such as:

- recurring bacterial infections (i.e. . . . E. coli, enteritis or hepatitis)
- outbreaks of viral disease — (a direct result of stress in the viral carrier bird).
- yeast overgrowth — (an immune system breakdown).
- aspergillosis — (a result of immune system compromise).
- physical trauma sustained in thrashing or panicked flight.

The underlying problem in the baby's psychology may be longstanding, subtle and, more often than not, invisible to the owners. Intolerance of the assertion of independence by the owner where the baby runs away when called and then is forced into cage restraint, flipping between total permission by the owner to do anything and then strict control, jealousy of a new baby, puppy or sexual/social pressure by an older bird in the cage may not be recognized as being extremely confusing to the baby. Feeding the baby by syringe until it is six to ten months old may be "cute" or emotionally gratifying to the overly protective owner, but it generally results in severe confusion for the physically developed juvenile who has been behaviorally and emotionally held at the level of a neonate, unbeknownst to the well meaning owner. An explanation of normal baby behaviors and their rapidly changing stages of evaluation will do much to assist the owner in contributing to the solution of the problem and prevent an unfortunate recurrence in another baby in the future.

Unwarranted punishment by the owner in the all too common form of beak flicking, toe pinching, nostril spraying, hitting or starvation (yes, these barbaric techniques are still

being promoted by misguided "bird trainers" and make bird training difficult for those who truly understand bird psychology) will only serve to exacerbate the original confusion for the baby and accelerate any hidden diseases as the natural body chemical corticosterone, which is produced by stress, will eventually reduce their limited immune defenses and the stage is then set for a disease or infection explosion.

Constructive alternatives for these time consuming and trying group of disorders that have been found to be effective include:

- increased physical holding and stroking
- playtime (i.e., hide and seek, boxes, chew toys)
- calming teas or herbs (contact a licensed herbalist or Doctor of Oriental Medicine, or visit a health food store)
- mirrors for nonaggressive or frightened birds (works only for some species, some may attack their image)
- environmental enrichment (windows, T.V., stereo)
- playmate (second young bird of same size after all other means have been investigated)
- avian behaviorist with experience. This does not mean a bird trainer or groomer (your manicurist may have great ears to listen to your problems, but they are not a trained psychologist).

The last two resorts should be used only after the first suggestions are exhausted or if the bird is in danger of causing severe self inflicted damage. These are the use of collars and antipsychotic drugs, such as diazepam (Valium™ - Roche Labs), clomipramide (Anafranil™ - Basel) or nortriptyline (Aventyl™ - Lilly) which do nothing to correct the original insult, only suppresses its after effects. It is best to use them in conjunction with the more corrective suggestions of distraction, entertainment and stimulation until an acceptable degree of success has been achieved.

Ideally, the sales source of the infant or juvenile should be providing this information prior to entering the new pet home, in addition to preventive medical management information. This is a much more humane and effective method, but its practice is very limited due to the lack of education of breeders in the subject and the amount of time required to

instruct new owners.

Providing new owners with appropriate literature, toys, a veterinarian's card, diet programs and brochures at the site of purchase will do much for the baby, new owner and the seller's time schedule as post-purchase frustrations and complaints are diminished through education efforts. One book found to be very well accepted and informative for new bird owners is the "Bird Owner's Home Health and Care Handbook" by Gary Gallerstein, D.V.M., Howell Books, 1984. A second edition is expected soon.

Suggested Avian Toy List for Mental Stimulation

(Especially for self motivators and highly intelligent individuals who are easily bored)

Change toys every 15 to 20 minutes to stimulate interest. (Youngsters have a very limited attention span)

- Soft wooden perches to chew on (green Eucalyptus, citrus, Birch, Sycamore, etc., or economy grade 2' x 4' boards)
- Wooden spoons - kitchen types
- Wooden thread bobbins - empty of thread
- Wooden tinker toy parts
- C-Clamps
- Long eye bolts with large wing nuts
- Plastic measuring spoons on a ring
- Toothbrushes
- Cardboard boxes - to hide in and chew
- Wooden old fashion clothes pins — no metal springs
- Soda straws
- Old socks knotted up
- Old padlock on the cage bars
- Wooden puzzle — child's type with bright colors
- Toilet paper tubes empty of paper
- Paper towel tubes empty of paper
- Boxes and paper bags - to hide in
- Small wooden rolling pin
- Wooden retrieving barbells for small dogs
- Hard plastic teething rings — use bright colors and varied sizes and shapes
- Knotted manila or cotton rope tied in large knots
- Paper cups - three or four different sizes
- Untreated, natural rawhide chew toys●