
Avian Behavior Classes

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Behavior problems are very common among pet birds. The author started a behavior class for pet birds and their owners in order to help people learn how to avoid these problems. The content of this class has been modified on an ongoing basis as more information has become available. Risks and liabilities must be considered when beginning such a class. Response to the training class has been favorable.

Introduction

Behavior problems are well recognized as a leading cause of euthanasia or abandonment for dogs and cats.^{1,2} People become disillusioned with the pet that does not meet their expectations. Pet birds are not exempt from this type of problem. Behavior problems such as biting, screaming, and feather picking, are very common among pet birds. As a result, these birds are often bounced from one home to another, frequently ending up as breeding birds. It is not difficult to find even very expensive birds given away because of behavioral problems. The birds that are sold or given to a new home are the lucky ones. Others are ignored or neglected because the owners are afraid of them, or put into basements or other isolated areas because they are too noisy. While the idea of placing these birds in breeding programs has merit, over many generations, we may be selectively breeding for the least desirable behavioral traits. While behavior is not highly heritable, genetics can certainly influence predispositions for certain behaviors. If only those pets that develop undesirable behaviors are brought into breeding programs, behavioral disorders may become increasingly common. Behavior classes for owners and birds are one measure to both prevent and rehabilitate problem parrots.

In addition to the benefit of improving the relationship between bird and owners, behavior classes can afford an opportunity for introducing birds to novel situations. Many pet birds live their entire lives in one room of a house. These birds often become very intolerant of small changes in their lives and will be easily stressed by inevitable events.^{3,4} An organized class, with birds included, allows for socialization of birds, owners, and the veterinary staff in a much less intimidating setting than the clinical examination.

Many of today's bird owners are hungry for information of any kind, and behavior is a hot topic. Even those owners who know quite a bit about avian behavior are anxious for more. The information regarding avian behavior is scattered in many places. In addition, there is considerable disagreement among authorities on bird behavior. This can lead to confusion and inappropriate handling of birds. Advice about bird behavior is often taken from untrained pet store personnel. In many areas, the avian veterinarian may be the only authoritative resource for bird owners. Of course, not every avian veterinarian is qualified to teach such a class. The veterinarian wishing to start behavior training must thoroughly familiarize themselves with pet birds, their behavior, and their relationships with owners. The instructor must also be a very confident handler of birds. Many veterinarians handle birds only when they are restrained. It is important that the instructor of the course be confident offering a hand for "step-ups" and know how to deal with the various

responses that the bird may have to the hand. If the instructor pulls the hand away from the bird when it reaches out with the beak, he cannot teach owners to handle the bird confidently. Counseling pet owners on behavior is an art that must be studied prior to starting.⁵ It is often helpful to directly observe the interactions between a bird and its owner. This can reveal a wealth of information about the relationship that an owner may be unable or unwilling to recognize.

Course Description

The author started a behavior class for pet birds and their owners in order to help people learn how to handle and interact with their birds. Because of the popularity of obedience training for dogs, the term avian obedience training was adopted. The course is five weeks long; the first week is for owners only, while the following four weeks is for birds and owners. Each session is about one hour long. During the first session, a videotape, *Parrots: Look Who's Talking* (Nature, Thirteen-WNET and PBS, New York NY) is shown. This tape is very entertaining and informative and introduces some of the concepts discussed in the class. The remainder of the first session is used for discussion. In the sessions where birds are present, discussions and bird exercises are mixed to keep up the interest of both the birds and owners. Ten minutes of talking followed by ten minutes of exercises appears to work well. Table 1 lists the topics and exercises covered in each of the sessions. To complement the class, a written handout is given to the class members. At the completion of the course, each bird is given a diploma, easily generated on a personal computer.

One concern with a class such as this is the transmission of infectious diseases. While this is not entirely preventable, the risk can be minimized by requiring that all registered birds are evaluated prior to entering the class. Each practice must determine what infectious diseases are of concern in their area. A health screen based on determining whether these diseases are present can then be designed. The type of client who is interested in such a class generally will agree to this requirement. Any birds with problem behaviors should be worked up for medical causes of these problems before assuming that it is solely behavioral. Clients should bring their own towels and carriers. The perches are made of polyvinyl chloride pipes and covered with disposable self adhesive elastic bandage so that they can be sanitized in between uses. Pre-weaned babies are not allowed as they are very susceptible to bacterial infections. In addition, these neonates lack the coordination and foot strength for some of the exercises. This is not a program that should be used for aviculture birds where risks of infectious disease are statistically higher. It is intended for pet birds where the need for protecting them must be tempered by the need to improve the quality of life.

The other concern with this program is liability. During the course of the sessions, owners may be bitten by their birds. As with clinical examinations, the liability for such bites is with the practice owner. However, having a technician handle the bird for the owner defeats the purpose. A waiver, indicating that owners are aware of the risk of being bitten, provides some protection in the event of a severe bite. If younger family members participate, a parent should give consent. Bird to bird aggression could also result in liability claims. While this has never occurred in the author's practice, it could easily ruin an otherwise pleasant class. To minimize risks, all birds are required to have trimmed wings and owners are not allowed to bring more than one bird for each handler.

Course Content

Introduction

During the class, it is emphasized that parrots are altricial birds and that they have very long behavioral development.^{3,6} Hand raised parrots do not have the instincts needed to be well adjusted pets. The owner's family must take on the role of the flock and guide the development of the chick. While some owners feel that teaching obedience to a bird is cruel and unnatural, but the opposite is true; it is cruel and unnatural to let them try to figure things out for themselves.³

Creating a parrot that is eager to learn

Pet parrots tend to be spoiled and lazy. Many have never been challenged or even encouraged to use their intelligence. In addition, most birds have an endless buffet in front of them at all times. As a result, many are not very motivated by food. In fact many will not even accept a treat when offered, much less perform a behavior to receive it. Some of the training that is done in the class is operant conditioning, which requires that the pupil is motivated by the reinforcing reward.

One technique that can make a bird more motivated by food is foraging. By making the process of finding, obtaining, and eating the food a more challenging process the bird appreciates the food more. In addition, it makes them more curious, active, and playful. In addition, a larger part of the day is spent foraging rather than engaging in stereotypical behaviors or excessive preening. The first step is to ration out the diet carefully. There should not be much, if any, excess. At least a portion of the food, favorite foods in particular, are then placed in a way that requires the bird to move, climb, sort, or search to find them. For example, the first step may be to place one fifth of the daily food into each of five smaller dishes, placed all around the cage. Once the bird is proficient at getting to the food, the task is made more difficult by mixing inedible, non-toxic objects (wooden beads, paper litter, etc.) with the food. It is uncommon for birds to swallow significant amounts of this foreign material, however, this should be monitored closely. Once proficiency is gained, the task is made more difficult still by covering the dish with paper, then wrapping individual food items in non-toxic paper. Additional morsels of food can be hidden in and around toys, on play gyms, etc.

When new behaviors are to be taught, some of the daily ration can be reserved for rewards. With this process, the bird enters training sessions eager to earn rewards.

Dominance

For most social animals a form of hierarchy develops to prevent true combat situations. According to some, most parrot flocks function according to a hierarchic arrangement.⁷ Young parrots learn to submit to the leader. If they try to share resources, they are bitten and chased away.⁶ Others argue that between individuals, there appears to be a dominant/submissive relationship, in flock situations no dominance has been described.⁸ Because of their intelligence, parrot social structure may not be a linear dominance hierarchy. There may be a matter of creating alliances more than of dominance. Also, dominance in one situation may not apply to another.⁹ Pairs may cooperate in agonistic interactions with other birds.¹⁰ Whether it comprises a true dominance hierarchy system or not, it certainly appears that parrots avoid violent conflict by ritualized posturing and positioning. The responses of one bird to another are likely to be learned or conditioned. Conditioning refers to the process by which behavior is modified by the outcome of past occurrences of that behavior. If

during one encounter or repeated encounters, an aggressive bluff gains an advantage for a bird, it is likely that the same behavior will be used again. If the other bird in this encounter avoids being bitten by deferring to the aggressor, but is bitten when standing his ground, the “submissive” behavior is reinforced. Likewise, parrots learn how to best interact with humans to achieve their goals. In human/parrot interactions, it appears that problems do not occur as a result of a failure to “dominate” birds. However, problems commonly occur when handlers allow birds to intimidate or “dominate” them. It is natural for a parrot to be somewhat reluctant to do certain things, such as allow handling by a new person, or go into the cage, or come out of the cage. Even nestlings and fledglings will threaten with an open beak, or lunge at a hand. If the person jerks the hand away, or is otherwise hesitant, the bird learns what a powerful tool aggression can be. Most of the time a threat, or mild nip, is all that is required to achieve the objective. If the handler fails to respond appropriately (in the eyes of the bird), more intensified aggression may occur. Is this dominance aggression? Whether or not these observations describe true dominance behavior or not will remain an academic argument for some time. However, it shares enough characteristics with the dominance aggression described in dogs by Overall that the terms dominance and dominance aggression will be used by this author.¹¹

During classes, it is emphasized that developing a dominant relationship with a bird is not about being aggressive or overbearing with them. It is simply a matter of confidence and handling technique. Each owner is observed and coached on hand position, tone of voice, and any other handling deficiencies. Once this has become comfortable for bird and owner, the step-up and step down exercises are performed daily to maintain trust and respect. If a bite occurs, the bird should be “stepped-up” several times in succession, a technique called laddering. The most important aspect is that the owner avoids showing fear. The bird should not be allowed to see how effective aggression can be in controlling interactions with humans.

Fear

Fearful, untamed, shy, or sensitive birds may require coaxing from its owners instead.¹² Fear and panic are easily recognized. Fearful birds will generally recoil from the source of their fear. They may hang on the back of their cages. If uncaged, they may fly, glide, or run away. Mild mistrust may be exhibited by constantly watching people. Fearful birds may bite, but generally only if cornered. They will generally prefer to flee. The mannerisms of the handler can help alleviate fear in a timid bird. A non-threatening posture with hands held behind the back mimics the folded wings of a bird. The eyes should be averted as staring is considered threatening. The tone of voice should be cheerful and coaxing. Movements should be slow and deliberate. Vocal cues can be used to calm birds. The key is to plan ahead and consistently use particular words and expressions in the same situations. This way the association between the word and the situation is clearly patterned. These words can then be used in a threatening situation to give a sense of security.¹³

As with any other problems, prevention of unreasonable fear is far more effective than treatment. By exposing young birds to as many things as possible, they learn how to accept change. Birds that never go anywhere, or see anything new become very neophobic.^{3,4} Those that are more worldly accept new things more readily. Vocal and other games can also promote independence. Some games that are recommended to owners in the authors practice are included Table 2. These were devised from many suggestions and sources and are not necessarily original. They are written in the same way that they are presented in client education materials. These games should be used daily to weekly, more early on and less as the bird matures and adjusts.

While prevention is ideal, an established fear can be alleviated by slowly, gradually, exposing the

bird to the source of its fear in a non-threatening setting. This process is called desensitization. Talking quietly to the bird, petting the bird, or allowing them up high will give some security. Increasing tolerance of the feared item, person, or place will eventually be noted.

Bonding

Thoughts have changed in recent years regarding bonding with birds. The whole point of having a pet is to bond with them in some fashion. While most birds' roles in a household are simple companions, occasionally birds are kept as surrogates for children, spouses, or parents. Sometimes birds, especially since they are long-lived, can serve as a last-link to a loved one that has passed away.¹⁴ When the behavior of a parrot causes this bond to be severed, the results can be devastating to the owner. Unfortunately, placement of these birds into these surrogate roles can lead to an unhealthy social environment. Ideally birds and owners interact as flock members, but not as mates. The author often advises owners to behave as a preschool or kindergarten teacher toward their parrot. This helps them grasp the type of interactions that will challenge and teach parrots without the inappropriate pair-bonding behaviors. Social activities for birds may include foraging, playing, flying as a group, and other relatively dynamic activities. Allopreening and cuddling are done primarily with the mate. These interactions should be reserved for evenings and naptimes or when the bird is confronted with unfamiliar things.^{15,16} Many birds will beg for attention. Behaviors birds use to seek attention include shaking toys, sneezing, soft vocalization, displays, crouching and wing quivering, staring, and screaming.¹⁷ Interactive, dynamic attention given to a begging bird might teach more appropriate behavior. As opposed to just petting, cuddling, or other sedentary social interactions, interactive, dynamic attention includes toy play, trick training, word games, or exercise. Healthy social environments include social feeding (eating with the owners-not feeding from the mouth!). This can allow more socialization in a more casual atmosphere. It also gives an opportunity to demonstrate independent eating by eating in front of the bird and offering to share food.¹⁵ Most psittacine birds remained paired year round and spend a large amount of time together. When the pair is separated by the brooding of eggs, the male will often come repeatedly to the nest to feed the mate. There are few times when there is no contact.^{10,18} "For such intensely social birds, life in an enclosure with no companionship must be the ultimate "psychological torture""¹⁶ Realistically, no one can provide 24-hour interaction with the bird. It is therefore best to avoid having the bird develop a pair bond with a person. In addition, birds that develop pair bonds with an owner will tend to be more aggressive. It is a myth that some species are "one person birds". Interaction with only one person in captivity is contradictory to the psittacid's social nature.¹⁹ Birds should be encouraged to be accepting of multiple people. If reluctant, "out-of-territory" interactions such as step-ups, rescues, or outings are recommended.¹⁵ Rescues involve such things as a person, who is not normally the favorite, bringing the bird for a veterinary visit or grooming. Following the procedure, and in this "hostile" environment, the person that the bird does not like starts to look very safe and comfortable to the bird. Outings are similar but simply involve taking the bird for a trip out of the home to an unfamiliar area. Again, the person becomes the most familiar thing to the bird. People disliked by a bird should practice step-up exercises in an area unfamiliar to the bird. This "home field advantage" will often result in a bird that behaves much better for a person they would normally bite.

Training Specific Behaviors

Certain behaviors that can be taught to birds can facilitate daily management. Some of the behaviors that are useful for pet birds to learn include submitting to towel restraint, going into a carrier, lifting the feet for nail maintenance or examination, etc. These behaviors are taught by operant conditioning. As an example, to teach a bird to allow a towel to be laid upon the back, the

first step is to first set the bird on top of the towel and give a treat. Once this is well tolerated, a corner of the towel is brought up for the bird to touch with the beak, and a treat is given. Then a section of towel is laid on the back and a treat is given. In this way, progressively, the bird is taught to allow the towel to be wrapped around the body.

The performance level of the birds in the class has been highly variable. Each bird, however, has shown improvement throughout the class. The birds coming in with the poorest behavior often show the most improvement. The owners generally feel closer to the bird and have a better understanding of the bird's needs. Several have repeated the class or had another family member go through the class.

Problem Behaviors

The final session of the course is used for discussion of specific behavior problems the participants may have. The manner in which these problems are dealt can be seen in other sections of these conference proceedings.

Discussion

The avian behavior classes have been very well received by the public. This class has been a tremendous positive public relations builder. The author has improved his own exam room demeanor by a greater understanding of parrot behavior. A project with such positive aspects also gives the instructor a lift in attitude. Clients bond with their birds better as a result of these classes. Better behavior on the part of the bird and a better understanding of parrots behavior on the part of the owner keep the frustration of both to a minimum. Several owners have decided to keep their birds instead of selling or placing them. Several people have started to handle their birds much more since taking the obedience class. They have been able to establish dominance and now they can handle the bird without chasing them around or being bitten. When owners have to administer treatments to their birds, those that have been to the class are able to comply with treatments better than before. One client that went through the class had a conure that was very cage territorial and, whenever he was brought in for boarding, his cage would be very dirty. After they had taken the class, they kept the cage much cleaner than before and the bird was easier to care for in the hospital. Most of the birds that have been through obedience classes are much easier to handle for clinical examinations. The birds have been to the hospital without having unpleasant procedures, so they are not stressed by their mere presence there. The other reason is that one of the exercises in the class is to play with the bird using a towel. These birds often allow the towel to be placed over them without a struggle. Obedience classes can also become a practice profit center. The material costs of running the class, including perches, photocopying, and the videotape, are minimal. The only other cost is the time of the person teaching the class. In the author's practice it is the veterinarian that teaches the class, however, a well trained and experienced technician could fill the instructor's role. More important than the revenues from the class itself is the fact that clients who take this class bond with the practice. They can see that their veterinarian is not just interested in money, or the medical aspects of birds. They can see that the bird's well being is considered important. This is something they tell their friends and family about.

TABLE 1: Content of Avian Obedience Class

Session	Discussion	Exercises
One	Videotape Introduction Environment Foraging	None
Two	Dominance Fear	Step-up Step-down Hand Hooding
Three	Bonding	All of above Carrier
Four	Operant conditioning	All of above Carrier Towel Foot handling Wing handling
Five	Problem Behaviors	All of above Special requests Medicating

TABLE 2: Games for Building Confidence

Game	Theory	How to Play
<i>House Tour</i>	In the wild, fledgling birds follow parents and flock mates around their environment. By seeing the response of the adult birds to various stimuli, they learn what to eat, what to fear, what to avoid, etc. This game is intended to do the same thing.	The bird must be tame and must know basic 'step-up' command. Carry the bird on the hand and walk around the house. Point out everything you see and say its name. Most importantly, be very calm. By seeing that you are not upset, they learn not to be. Don't forget to introduce all of the human and animal household members. Also, do not neglect sounds. Take the bird near the source of some sounds and do the same exercise. The bonus of this game is that talking birds often learn how to identify people and things in the house.
<i>Color Game</i>	Parrots are very visually oriented and intelligent creatures. This game helps stimulate their curiosity.	Take pieces of colored construction paper. Say the color to the bird. Repeat for all of the other colors. Keep in mind that the bird sees colors slightly differently than you do, but can still distinguish them well. In more advanced sessions, ask the bird what color you're holding. For even better results, do this game with another person in front of the bird. When the person gets the answer correct, he/she is lavishly praised.
<i>Whistle While You Work</i>	In the wild, parrots vocalize to maintain contact with members of their flock. Being alone puts birds at greatly increased risk of predation. Survival depends on maintaining contact. If they cannot hear the response of the group, they think they have lost contact, then they call louder. It is often said to never respond to a bird's vocalization. Imagine the following scenario. You are at home alone and you hear someone come in the door. You think it is your spouse so you call out his/her name but you get no response. You call again and still no response. At this point you start to panic and get ready to call the police! This is what we are doing to the bird when we ignore their calls.	In order to take the flock contact initiative away from the bird, announce where you are as you move about the house. This is especially true if you are out of sight. Try whistling, humming, singing, or talking as you go.
<i>Trick Training</i>	Parrots are highly intelligent birds. Mental challenges can occupy some of the time they may otherwise use for self-destructive behaviors. Additionally, trick training provides ammunition for counterconditioning. Tricks can and should be relatively natural behaviors that the bird learns to do on request.	Watch your bird for certain behaviors that are interesting. Then start to give a cue, try to get the bird to do the behavior, and reward even mild attempts at performing. As time goes on, require a little better performance to receive a reward. Rewards can be verbal or food treats. Ideas that may be useful include waving the foot, somersault on the perch or table, holding up wings, holding up objects with the foot, or tearing up a toy.

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