



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

Correction of Behavioral Problems in Pet Birds

As with dogs and cats and other pets, unwanted behaviors may negatively affect the pet quality of pet birds. Owners often look to veterinarians for advice on how to correct behavioral problems that might otherwise result in the owner giving up the pet or placing it in a breeding situation. The most common bird behavior problems include biting, aggression, screaming, feather plucking/chewing and self-mutilation.

Behavior problems can be avoided by teaching the owner to properly train and socialize their pet for the hand-feeding stage (which is when most pet birds are acquired) and to maintain dominance throughout the relationship. Baby birds should be handled gently, exposed to a wide variety of experiences and socialized with several different people during its early stages. As soon as possible, the bird should be taught several simple commands starting with “up,” the command to step onto an owner’s hand. Babies must next learn to stay where put, such as on a play gym or perch, and to step down from the owner’s hand back onto the perch. Owners maintain dominance by not allowing the bird to perch on their shoulder, keeping the bird below eye level and repelling any challenges with a firm “no.”

Birds who scream may be bored, attempting to attract attention or simply letting off steam. In the wild, birds locate each other through vocalizations, so it is a natural bird behavior to call for its flock members (humans, in the case of pet birds) when separated. However, since it is impossible for most people to constantly stay within visual range of their pet, birds must learn to accept separations and entertain themselves when left alone. This training begins during the hand-feeding stage. Babies should not be handled constantly.

Part of early handling should include “interactive play” where babies are shown how to handle toys and explore new objects in their environment by their human parents. Older birds who scream for unacceptable periods of time should be ignored until the behavior extinguishes itself. Owners who scream back or otherwise interact with the bird are obviously rewarding the bird and reinforcing the behavior. Covering a screaming bird’s cage or placing the entire cage in a dark closet for short periods of time can be helpful.

Feather plucking and self mutilation not caused by a medical problem can be assumed to be psychological in origin. The high intelligence of birds make the diagnosis and treatment of “mental disorders” extremely difficult. Behavioral modification, correction fo underlying behavioral or husbandry problems and the selective use of antidepressant or antipsychotic drugs can sometimes be helpful.