



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

How Should I Play With My Bird?

In the wild, pet parrots are known to be extremely social, gregarious and perform behaviors that to human observers appear to be play. As this is an important part of the natural behavior of birds in the wild, owners should replicate this as well as possible to help improve the captive bird's mental welfare.

Unfortunately for some birds, a human's idea of or attempts at play can be misunderstood as courtship or reproductive behaviors, which in some birds can lead to a number of undesirable and unhealthy consequences, including screaming, biting, preferring the company of only one human, improper molt and in some cases feather plucking.

Misunderstanding occurs when humans try to interact with pet parrots as they would a pet dog or cat, as the behaviors of these species among others of their kind are very different. Desirable play activities attempt to reproduce and enforce behaviors seen in non-mating flocks of social birds. Undesirable play activities tend to reinforce behaviors seen in mated pairs, which for most owners are not desirable, as mated birds tend to be secretive, drive off other flock members, and, mate.

When a parrot perceives a human being as a mate, the bird may bite other family members, defend the cage or other favorite spots from intruders, scream when the preferred person leaves the room, and demonstrate masturbating and other mating behaviors.

The following desirable play activities tend to replicate social parrot behavior. The undesirable play activities in some cases replicate pair bond or mating behavior.

Desirable Play Activities

- Step up and step down onto various perch's on command for all family members and confident strangers
- Staying on perch or play gym when placed there
- Social vocalization-talking, singing
- Social eating-sharing food items with other human flock members
- Trick training, clicker training with food rewards
- Limited social grooming-occasional scratch on head or under wings
- Exploring toys and other safe novel objects
- Foraging behaviors-toys or objects that replicate searching for food items
- Meeting and socializing with unfamiliar but friendly humans

Undesirable Play Activities

- Perching/climbing on human shoulders, head or chest
- Leaving perch or play gym to explore the house on own
- Constant screaming
- Taking foods directly from human mouth (simulates courtship feeding)
- Intense cuddling with owner, for example under clothing
- Long periods of grooming by owners, especially near tail
- Masturbating with humans or toys
- Nesting in boxes, or other materials

- Interacting exclusively or even mostly with only one family member