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### **How to Raise a Healthy Bird**

Written by Dr. Deanna M. Becker, DVM

“A pet bird is not for every animal lover. I like to say that it takes “a special kind of crazy” to commit yourself to raising a bird. Pet birds are needy creatures. They are generally very loud, messy, need frequent cage cleanings and water changes, have special food requirements, and crave lots of attention from their owners. Consider a pet bird to be like a toddler that you’re legally permitted to put in a cage for a good number of hours per day.

If you are going to own ANY type of bird, you should be realistic about what you are getting yourself into BEFORE PURCHASING THE BIRD. If you have already bought the bird, and you realize it isn’t the right pet for you, please be honest with yourself and find it a more appropriate home *sooner than later*. An isolated or ignored bird will live a miserable life, and that’s not fair to do to any animal. Now that I’ve hopefully weaned out those that should not commit to bird ownership, here’s some advice for those of us that have committed to bird ownership and have a desire to make our bird’s lives as happy and healthy as possible☺. In other words.... “Let’s talk about something happy!”

First of all, you can’t read enough about owning a bird. The bird magazines are a great place to start. I’ve also included a few books and articles at the end of this handout that can help you to better understand the way birds think, and therefore direct you toward the kinds of things that your bird needs to live a happy and healthy life.

### **Social Interaction**

There are all kinds of problems that can arise from raising your bird incorrectly. So the best plan is to try to understand how your bird thinks, what kinds of interactions he/she needs, and which kinds of interactions may be detrimental to your bird’s health and happiness. You hear a lot about birds that bite, scream and are aggressive, pull out their own feathers, or are chronic egg layers. Believe it or not, these behavior problems are often linked to the types of interactions that people have with the bird!

Here’s the scoop-Birds, in the wild, have three kinds of interactions with other birds. It’s important to grasp this idea if you’re going to understand why your bird does what he/she does.

1. First, there are flock interactions. (These are healthy, good, helpful interactions for you to have at home with your pet bird.) Flock interactions include activities like:
  - a. Vocalizing
  - b. Short periods of grooming
  - c. Short periods of feeding or giving treats
  - d. Foraging together
  - e. “Flapping” and exercising together
  - f. “Flying” or exploring together
  - g. Training sessions where your bird learns to “step up”, “step down”, “stay”, and repeat words and whistles

That’s why it is really important that you give your bird a large enough cage to have a “flapping area”, a “foraging area”, and plenty of interactive toys to occupy his/her mind and body. Birds need to vocalize. Realize that a certain amount of squawking is normal for a bird, and you shouldn’t expect to have a quiet home anymore.

However, excessive squawking can be a sign of boredom or frustration.

2. Next, there are friendly-pairing interactions within the flock. These are “borderline” in terms of interactions that are safe to have with your bird. These interactions include:

- a. Grooming (like scratching your bird's head or under his/her wings, or allowing your bird to groom your hair, face or fingers)
- b. Hand feeding the bird

On one hand, these interactions help to “bond” you to your bird, and all owners wouldn't mind owning a bird that likes to “cuddle.” However, BE CAREFUL, because repeated and/or prolonged periods of grooming, cuddling, or feeding can leave to a “mate-courtship relationship” between you and your bird. These kinds of interactions, when excessive, are dangerous to the happiness and physical health of your bird. The mate-courtship relationship is described next.

3. In the wild, healthy birds belong to a flock, and within the flock, they bond in pairs. Some of the pairs are friendly in nature, but others escalate to a mate-courtship relationship. In the mate-courtship relationships, prolonged or repeated grooming and feeding activities trigger sex hormone to be released in the bird's body. These types of interactions, when prolonged or repeated, “cross the line” for a bird from “best friend” to “mate” and trigger sexual signals in your bird. *“Too much” is a different amount to each bird. It's up to you to watch your bird closely and regulate the amount of time you devote to these activities.* The release of sex hormones in your bird causes reproductive activities to happen in its body and causes sexual behaviors to develop. In a pet bird, these sexual behaviors are undesirable to owners and, physically, a constant stimulation for reproduction can lead to all sorts of medical problems for your bird. Here are some examples of the problems that can be caused by this kind of mate-courtship relationship between you and your bird.

- a. Behavior problems:

- Aggression and territoriality
- Regurgitation
- Masturbation involving perches, toys, or people
- Feather picking
- Self mutilation of chest, legs, and/ or cloaca
- Abnormal vocalization/constant screaming
- Paper shredding/nest building
- Hiding under paper/seeking dark places

- b. Medical problems:

- Chronic egg laying
- Egg binding/Dystocia
- Weight loss
- Muscle weakness
- Fractures of long bones/ metabolic bone disease
- Cloacal prolapsed with secondary infection
- Ovarian cystic disease
- Sternal or leg mutilation/ feather picking/ with secondary infection

A lot of this kind of thinking is counter-intuitive to most people. If you've ever owned a dog or a cat, you know that no amount of petting or snuggling is ever too much. But birds think and respond differently than do dogs and cats. Your life as bird-parent will be much happier and easier if you learn to understand your bird and give him/her the type of attention that he/she needs in the right amounts. It's not that you can't snuggle with your bird, it's just that you must also give your bird the other kinds of stimulation that they need mentally and physically so that snuggling is not their primary or solitary type of attention. After you understand the way your bird thinks, the rest of the “bird care instructions” will start to make sense.” Here are a few:

### **The Cage Environment**

The first question that comes up is always “What size cage do I need to get for my bird?” The honest answer is that you should get the largest cage you can afford. The realist answer is that you should buy a cage in which about 6 birds of the same size could live, stretch out their wings simultaneously, and not bump into each other. If you buy a cage that big, you can't go wrong. Bar spacing is important too. The bars should be spaced together so that your bird cannot get its head between the bars, even if he/she really tried. I've seen birds hang themselves to death through the bars of their cages. As rule, 1 and 3/16 inches is a good space for medium birds and 1 and 3/8 inches is good for larger birds. 3/4 inch spacing is fine for cockatiels and parakeets and smaller than that is probably fine for finches. Horizontal bars are nice for the birds because they're easy to climb. Vertical bars make it hard to climb, but they don't fray long tail feathers. It's your choice. Birds like to chew on anything in their reach, so be careful about what types of materials are used to make his/her cage and toys. I only recommend stainless

steel cages to be safe. Cage bars should never be painted. Pet stores sell painted cages and cages are made out of all material, so be careful about what you buy. Also, keep in mind that the fancier the bars on the cages, the more places are for your bird to get its foot caught. A few years ago, my own cockatiel caught his foot in his cage door during the night, and chewed halfway through its own foot before I found him stuck in the door the next morning. It can happen, so just be thoughtful about your choices. By the way, he lived through the tragedy and ended up just having some tendon damage.

The next question that owners have is “Where should the cage be placed?” You have lots of choices, but keep in mind a few rules.

1. In general, you should pick a safe, high traffic area of your house where the bird has the opportunity to interact with people and keep an eye on what’s going on in the house.
2. **Never place the bird’s cage in direct sunlight.** Birds can die of heat stroke. A bright room, though, out of direct sunlight, is ideal.
3. **Your bird should NOT be housed in the kitchen.** Teflon poisoning from the fumes emitted from using Teflon-coated pans in the kitchen is a major killer of pet birds. Keep your bird on a different floor of the house when cooking with Teflon or avoid using Teflon-coated pans all together. “Caphlon” is the same thing as Teflon as far as your bird is concerned. Other kitchen fumes from burning food and cleaning products can also be harmful to your bird.
4. Dreary basements are a poor choice for your bird’s cage. A finished basement is fine, as long as it’s not damp or too cold and as long as there’s enough action going on so that the bird stays involved in the family.

When you clean your bird’s cage, use warm soapy water and a sponge; Rinse everything very well so that no soap remains on the cage bars for your bird to lick up when he/she gets bored. Make sure everything is dry before putting the bird back in his/her freshly cleaned cage. You can use newspaper or plain paper towels to line the bottom of your bird’s cage. Your bird should not be able to bite or chew the cage lining though, so make sure the cage comes equipped with bared flooring that separates the lined area from the rest of the cage.

Your bird needs an assortment of perches of varying diameter, to provide exercise, to prevent foot injuries and such ailments as sores and arthritis. Your bird should be able to climb all over his/her cage, so place the perches accordingly. Stagger them, and make sure there’s enough clearance of the bird to sit up comfortably. The perches can be made of most kinds of untreated wood. There is Manzanita, madrone, maple, apple wood, etc. They can be made from PCV pipe and from acrylic, like Plexiglas™ but these should be sanded slightly to roughen up the otherwise slick surface. There are rope perches. There are even concrete perches. All of these are fine to use. Provide at least two different shapes of perches so that your bird’s feet aren’t held in only one shape all day long. The bird should be encouraged to stretch its feet to keep the feet healthy. You can make your own perches if you know that the wood you are using is untreated and that there are no bugs or mold in the wood. Cure it until it’s thoroughly dried out. You can leave the bark on because birds love to peel it off. A “T-stand” type perch is a useful training tool to have around.

**TOYS!!!!** My favorite subject! You literally can’t have too many. You need at least eleven! Birds are playful and intelligent animals. A bored bird is a frustrated bird. A frustrated bird screams A LOT and may act out by hurting itself or the person reaching in its cage. Is this the bird you want in your house? So it stands to reason that the more toys that your birds has, the healthier and happier he/she will be! Eleven may seem like a random number, but eleven is what the experts say to have, and I believe that the correct number is at least eleven toys per bird. The happiest bird I ever knew had so many toys in his cage that you had to look pretty hard in the cage to find the bird amongst the toys. He was quiet and content and always had something to do. There are different types of toys out there and your bird should have a few of each kind:

1. Destructible toys – It’s a natural behavior for your bird to destroy his/her toys. So go buy stuff or find things that you don’t mind being destroyed and give them to the bird. I make toys out of household items. My bird gets every milk cap, film canister, and pen cap that I can spare. My husband and I have strung together wiffle balls, rope and old t-shirts to make toys for our parrot to have fun with. Those toys are her favorites!
2. Puzzle toys – Buy or make toys that give your bird the opportunity to figure out the design, or have parts that move in the toy, etc. Be creative.
3. Foraging toys – Every bird should have a “foraging tray”. We made one for our parrot out of an aluminum cookie sheet (not Teflon-coated). We keep an abundance of small wooden blocks and toys, dried beans, dried fruit, and nuts down there for her to route around in. In the wild, birds spend a large portion of their day looking for food, so the foraging tray mimics that activity and gives your bird one more healthy thing to do during the day. Keep his/her pellets separate from the foraging tray so that eating a meal is different even for him/her. There are also toys sold at pet

stores that hide nuts or have a treat stick hidden inside so that the bird has to dig into the toy to get the food. These also serve as foraging toys.

4. Entertainment toys – **Don't give your bird mirrors.** Again, pet stores sell them for birds and birds love them. BUT, mirrors encourage mating behavior and that is never a good idea for a pet bird with no real mate! We talked about that earlier! Also, **baby toys make great, safe, cheap toys for birds.** So do household items like toilet paper tubes without the paper, ping-pong balls, wiffle balls, ballpoint plastic pen tubes with the ink cartridge removed, old toothbrushes (thoroughly soaked and cleaned), and plastic measuring spoons and cups.

### What to Feed

Largely, it depends on the type of bird you own. Softbills like finches and canaries are naturally seed eaters, but should have green food as well. Some types of canaries need red food that is high in beta-carotene in order to maintain their colorful feathering. Lorikeets and other brush-tongued parrots eat special nectar. Toucans and Toucanettes need a diet low in iron and will eat live food also. I recommend that that you buy a book on the particular species of bird that you own for detailed feeding instructions.

The most common pet birds in the United States are Psittacines (aka hookbills). These include parakeets (budgies), cockatiels, conures, lovebirds, cockatoos, Amazon Parrots, African Grey Parrots, and macaws. Research and experience show that hookbills stay healthier and live longer on pelleted diets rather than seed-based diets, no matter how nutritionally complete a seed-based diet claims to be! Seed is high in fat and low in most nutrients necessary for good health. Parrots that eat seed are prone to obesity and often suffer from nutritional deficiencies. "Fortified seed" has most of the nutritional fortification in the hulls. Often bird owners think that they are providing a complete diet by purchasing fortified seed mixes. Unfortunately, the vitamins and minerals are coated on seed hulls, which are discarded when the bird eats the seed. Feeding your bird a seed-based diet is like you living on potato chips! Seeds are nice as a treat once in a while, but you shouldn't base your whole diet on fatty junk food. Seeds are very high in fat and can therefore cause liver disease and reproductive stimulation, just to name a few.

*Note: Spinach and chard are very high in calcium, BUT they are also very high in oxalic acid, which binds to calcium. In other words, spinach is not a good source of calcium for your bird. In addition, given over an extended period of time, spinach and chard can lead to a medical problem called gout. Some greens that are safer are collard greens, mustard, dandelion, alfalfa greens, water cress and escarole.*

Although all fruits are accept, they should only be offered in small amounts due to their high water and sugar content. Consider fruit to be like "candy" for a bird, and give it as a treat only every once in a while. Orange fruits such as papaya, mango and cantaloupe are highest in vitamin A and would be most beneficial for your bird.

Healthy, preferably non-processed "people food", such as well-cooked meat, fish and chicken, tofu, cheese yogurt (non-fat low-fat), cooked egg, corn, peas, beans, pasta, rice (brown is best), and low sugar and low sodium cereals etc. can also be offered in small amounts.

- Stay away pork products because they tend to be salt-cured and high amounts of salt can be detrimental to your bird. There are also some anecdotal reports of parasites that are found in pork that can be harmful for your bird to eat.
- You should never feed your bird avocado or chocolate. They are poisonous to birds if fed in sufficient amounts.
- Food high in salt and fat such as chips, pretzels, crackers and preserved meat should also be avoided since birds are very sodium sensitive.
- Alcohol, caffeine, and rhubarb are toxic to birds.
- Many fruit seeds and pits are also toxic.
- Grit, gravel and oyster shell should never be fed to companion birds. They naturally contain lead and could give your bird lead poisoning, which is fatal if not caught in time.
- Birds that consume at least 50-60% of their intake in pelleted food do not require vitamin and mineral supplements and further supplementation can actually be toxic. Supplements include powders, drops, cuttlebone and mineral blocks. If you are feeding your bird the right stuff, they just don't need the supplements!

If your bird has already been raised on an all-seed diet, there is hope! Your veterinarian can teach you some tricks to convert your "junk-food eater" to a pellet-and-table-food-connoisseur.

### Medical Care

These are my own professional recommendations that I have developed from many years of pet bird ownership and veterinary bird care. I strongly encourage you to have the "post-purchase exam" outlined below. It is a good way to make sure that your bird is healthy to start with and that he/she has no disease that could be contagious to you or your family.

### **Pre-purchase Examination**

Before you purchase a bird, any reputable breeder or pet show should allow you to arrange for the bird to be examined by a veterinarian that specializes in avian medicine. You will likely have to assume the cost of the appointment yourself, but I think it is worth it to avoid purchasing a sick bird.

### **Post-purchase Examination**

I recommend that every new bird following:

1. A blood test to make sure the bird is negative for:
  - a. Polyoma virus
  - b. Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease
  - c. Chlamydiosis (Psittacosis)(\*\*\*Chlamydiosis testing is particularly important because Chlamydia is a zoonotic disease, meaning that it can be spread from the bird to any person that comes in close contact with the bird.)
2. Baseline blood chemistry and complete blood count (\*To make sure that the bird doesn't have any underlying infections or disease of the organ systems)
3. A fecal swab (\*To make sure the bird has the right kind of bacteria in its digestive tract – very important for a bird's health)
4. A choanal swab of the mouth (\*To make sure that the bird isn't harboring any harmful yeast that can cause any respiratory problems later)
5. Wing trim
6. Nail trim
7. +/- DNA sexing

### **Bi-monthly brief appointment for a wing trim and nail trim**

**Annual Examination:** I recommend that your pet bird be examined by veterinarian at least once per year for any bumps, lumps, or problems that may help us to catch a disease process as early as possible so that we have a chance to treat it effectively.

\*I recommend that the baseline blood chemistry and complete cell count to be rerun every 3-5 years in order to re-evaluate the bird's organ health. But of course, this is at the discretion of the bird's owner. If your bird is easily stressed, then I would recommend keeping the blood draws to a minimum!

### **Recommended Reading:**

1. *Guide To A Well-Behaved Parrot* by Mattie Sue Athan
2. *The Bird Care Book* by Sheldon L. Gerstenfeld, VMD
3. *Sex and the Single Bird* article by Brian L. Speer, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian)

