



## How To Keep YOUR Parrot From Ending Up In Rescue

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Statistics are alarming regarding the future of our companion psittacines. Working as a parrot behavior consultant, I cannot count the number of times I hear the words, “*I would NEVER give up my parrot,*” and more times than I wish to count I hear later that this person has done exactly that, with many of those unfortunate birds landing in rescue organizations.

Why do parrots end up in rescue, and how can you prevent this from happening to YOUR bird? There are certainly catastrophic events that you cannot prevent, such as my having to give up my scarlet macaw 33 years ago when I had to dismantle my life to care for my dying mother. However, there are many circumstances that **are** preventable and those are what I will discuss here.

### **Prior To Getting ANY Parrot**

If you have a family, make certain you aren't the only one who wants to live with a parrot. It incenses me when I see dialogues on the internet to the effect of *My husband doesn't want me to get any more birds, but I'm going to do it anyway.* How can people be so selfish that they think their desires have precedence over everyone else's in their environment? Would people be so foolish to choose to have a child when their spouse does not want one? I suppose so, but that is NOT in the best interest of that unborn child.

Phoebe Linden is a dear friend of mine, but she would not sell me one of her babies, because she knows that my husband does not like living with parrots. He tolerates my Blue and gold Sam because she was here first ... and he knows exactly what will happen if he foolishly suggested that I choose between them. Living with parrots is like living with someone else's spoiled brat, and those of us who love them know exactly how much trouble they can be. Bringing a parrot into an environment where others are not delighted to welcome it, can set that bird up for failure in the future. Besides, one needs the full cooperation of all family members to properly socialize a parrot, and to prevent that bird from over-bonding to only one person. *Cooperation* is the operant word, here, and cooperation starts with respect and consideration being shown towards the opinions of each and every family member.

### **Once The Decision Is Made**

When everyone in the environment agrees a parrot would be a happy addition, then one should look for the very best bird to fit into your lives. You need to look harshly at your environment and your lifestyle. For example, you live in an apartment and you want a



cockatoo? Are you already so busy that you can't get everything done? If you answered yes to these questions, you need to reassess your situation in relation to parrots. If there are allergy sufferers in the group, then have them handle multiple species of birds, burying their noses in feathers of all types. Do NOT purchase a species of psittacine who aggravates the allergies of any family member. If there are noise sensitive people in the environment, then stick to the species of parrots that are known to be "quieter." Being a "quieter" species, of course, is a relative thing, as there is no such thing as a *quiet* parrot. However, some species (such as pionus, budgies and cockatiels) are quieter than the ones that are famous for being REALLY LOUD, and those are the ones to consider in those circumstances. (As an aside, trying to keep a parrot quiet so it does not aggravate another family member, invariably leads to excessive screaming.) Are family members terrified of the enormous beak of a macaw? If so, you need to look to smaller psittacines that aren't so imposing and scary.

No matter how badly you want a particular species, the feelings and opinions of others in the environment must be considered. To do otherwise indicates that your desires supersede those of other people in the environment, and that is not fair for the others, or the bird. To do so would again indicate that your desires supercede those of other family members, and that is not fair.

### **The Purchase**

Once you have decided regarding the best parrot species to join your household, the next step is to find the best source. For obvious reasons, your local discount bird mart is not likely to fit into this category. To maximize the potential for successful cohabitation with a psittacine, you should go to the best breeders and/or pet stores on the planet. These people properly socialize their babies to happily interact with new people. They are taught the simple commands of up and down, enabling inexperienced people to easily handle them. An experienced avian veterinarian has properly checked them, and vaccinated them if necessary.

The best breeders and/or pet stores will not sell unweaned parrots to the general public. Instead, they allow their babies to wean at their own speed, and teach them to happily eat a wide variety of foods, including (in the order of importance, in my opinion) pellets, vegetables, fruits and seed. Ideally, they permit their babies to fledge normally, allowing psittacines to learn to control their flight prior to flight feather clipping (if necessary). According to Phoebe Linden, this exponentially increases a baby parrot's self-confidence, allowing the natural development of athleticism and curiosity.

### **Letting The Bird "Choose You"**

People are often told that potential parrot buyers look for the bird that "chooses them." While this is a nice idea, I personally value this criterion well below the necessity of dealing with the best possible source. After all, this requirement effectively limits most people to buying locally, no matter how bad the sources. With my 20 years of experience in avian medicine and 10 years in behavior consulting, if I were in the market for a baby psittacine, I would consider the caliber of the source to be far more important than seeking an



instantaneous, magical bond with a bird. Forgive my cynicism, but I place “letting the bird choose you” in the same category with “love at first sight.” Both are romantic and appealing concepts, but they are not, in my opinion, necessary precursors to a long and successful relationship ... with a human or a psittacine.

### **The Perfect Baby**

Purchasing the Perfect Baby Parrot from the Perfect Source does not guarantee an unblemished future with that bird. By avoiding substandard sources, you have avoided starting off with a pre-existing disadvantage. Your new baby is already well socialized, athletic and confident, fledged and fully weaned onto an excellent diet. However, this does not mean the baby will stay perfect. After all, the incompetent caregiver can take the best baby parrot on the planet, and turn it into a neurotic, biting and screaming maniac. Trust me on this, I’ve seen it done. So starting with The Perfect Parrot is only the beginning – the rest is YOUR job.

### **Continued Training**

As soon as some caretakers have trained their young parrots to respond politely to the commands of up and down, many make the mistake of not continuing to utilize them. This is similar to what I see happen with people and a new puppy. They teach the puppy to behave on a leash, to sit and to come on command. Once the dog is fully trained, these people curtail the training, allowing those skills to atrophy. Years later, these same people appear quite startled when their dog no longer walks politely on a leash – and of course, this is the dog’s fault, right? (My favorite analogy to this type of situation is to ask people how much algebra they remember from high school.)

As these well-meaning people give up the controls the commands afforded them, they also gradually lose control of their companion parrot’s behavior as it matures. Serious problems result. Often these people then call behavior consultants like myself, and they say, “*But I TAUGHT him the commands, so why is this happening, now?*” It is as if they think that doing the early training was like a magic spell, guaranteed to ward off behavior problems for the bird’s entire life without any further effort on their part. Would that it were so easy!

The reality is simple. Parrots need to be trained. Parrot caretakers must continue not only the use of the commands, but also the training itself, for that training to continue to have an effect. I recommend my clients continue having 5-10 minute lessons once every week or two for the *remainder of the bird’s life*, in addition to constantly using the verbal commands when handling their parrot. As a consequence, the positive effects of those controls will remain in place, decreasing the potential for serious problems as the bird matures. When (you notice that I don’t say IF) problem stages appear in the future, I recommend my clients go back to daily lessons for a week or two. This seems to reassure the birds and settle them down again. It means, after all, that those benevolent controls are still in place, keeping them safe.

### **Continued Socialization**

Socialization is a critical issue, and like training, this is not something the good breeder



or store does so that you don't have to. To socialize a bird is to give it the tools with which to succeed in its environment. Getting a well-socialized bird means the process has already been started, but it is far from completed when you bring a bird home, no matter what its age.

A well-socialized parrot is adaptable to new circumstances and flexible in dealing with change. Despite what much parrot literature says, I do not think it is good – or healthy – to establish patterns in a parrot's life so the bird knows what to expect next. Of course, it needs to know it will get the excellent diet, environment, love and interaction it needs, but not, in my opinion, at specific times.

Even if parrots, like people, do feel better with patterns, allowing behavioral rigidity to develop is not good for a psittacine. Change is a fundamental part of life, so companion parrots must be habituated to it. Survival in the wild, after all, is based on adaptability to a constantly changing environment. Despite their reputation for inflexibility as companion parrots, the African Grey is not yet apparently endangered in the wild. This speaks of how adaptable they actually are, so their reputation of being “sensitive to change” has more to do, in my opinion, with the human environment than it does to any innate characteristic of the species itself.

Caretakers should constantly introduce interesting, non-threatening change to prevent this problem. Parrots that are allowed to settle into safe patterns are more prone to exhibiting stress reactions like feather-pulling the second anything is new. Trying to protect a parrot from change only postpones the inevitable, intensifying the possible psychological trauma when it does happen. Therefore, it is vital to teach parrots that change is fun and non-threatening, and continue that throughout their lives. In any case, who can guarantee he/she can maintain a pattern for the 60-80 years?

Sally Blanchard's *Warm Potato Game* is an excellent technique with which to maintain all the humans in the environment as important members of a parrot's flock, and it's equally useful for introducing new people, like a new neighbor or pet sitter. By working in a neutral room, you form a circle and slowly pass the bird around from person to person. Each circle member steps the bird onto his/her hand with the up command, then interacts positively with the bird before passing it to the next person. In this way, the bird will understand that each person in the circle is important, so the bird should be polite to all.

The weekly use of this game can also help prevent parrots from becoming so over-bonded to one person that no one else can handle them. This problem, known as “The One Person Bird” is a common problem that guarantees the birds will have difficulties later. In the wild, parrots are social animals that interact with others, not just their mates, and it isn't psychologically healthy for a parrot to only interact with one other person. Encourage your feathered friend to develop friendships with other people, and spend time visiting them can aide with this. My old macaw loves it when I go out of town, because it means she gets to visit with her (and my) friend Peggy. This is healthy for a parrot, so please, don't be so neurotic that you think it is good if your bird only likes you. Actively work to resolve this problem, or better yet, don't let it develop in the first place.



### **DON'T TOLERATE PROBLEM BEHAVIORS!**

Don't allow behaviors in your psittacines that you know no one else will tolerate, because you are setting them up for future failure if you do. If you are an adult human and you have a young medium or large sized parrot, the odds are very good that no matter how much you love your parrot, you WILL give it up at some point. With their long potential life spans, companion parrots can easily outlive us. When you will become too old or sick to be able to give it the care it deserves, who will take your non-stop screamer or your attack parrot who routinely draws blood on everyone but you?

It seems to me that raising a psittacine companion is similar to the process of raising a child. Human parents understand their child will mature and leave the safety of their home (i.e., "leaving the nest"). To properly prepare their child for a successful future, they must teach the child the skills necessary for forming positive relationships, succeeding in school, being able to get and keep a good job, etcetera. Since psittacine birds are capable of long life spans, caretakers need to raise their parrots with the same forethought as good parents, teaching proper boundaries for behaviors and socializing the parrot to interact successfully with other people. Such training virtually guarantees the parrot will transition to its future home smoothly and successfully. However, if not instilled, initial caretakers actually lay the groundwork for the psittacid's total failure and misery in its next home.

Parrots deserve better from us, don't you think?