

HOW TO BEHAVE AROUND YOUR NEW BIRD

New pets, including parrots, are like new exercise equipment. At first a new exercise bike is used daily with great passion. As time goes by, the bike gets used less until eventually the bike ends up in the garage to collect dust! Unfortunately, many birds are purchased under the same conditions; the new owners bring the bird home, lavishing it with toys, food, attention, and a beautiful cage. After a while, the owners become less interested in the bird, get tired of the maintenance and/or frustrated with an annoying behavior. At this point, finding a new home for the parrot is considered.

This is a common scenario. As a bird store owner, my responsibility is to prepare a potential bird owner for the physical and emotional needs of a pet bird. As a bird owner, it is your responsibility to commit yourself to the proper care and well-being of your new pet bird. Educating yourself about birds will help your bird to be a healthier, happier companion. Ronies highly recommends the book *Guide to a Well Behaved Parrot* by Mattie Sue Athan (Barrons) for all bird owners.

Many people are so thrilled to purchase their first bird that they do not realize how important it is to establish guidelines regarding who handles the bird, for how long, and how to begin training the family to act around the bird. Consistent guidance is the key not only in teaching your human family how to act around the bird, but also with helping your parrot understand how to live in a human world.

A key point to remember about a parrot is they are essentially wild animals that are raised and/or kept in captivity. Like a parent parrot would do in the wild, it is up to a parrot's human parent to teach it appropriate behavior. Living in a human world presents many different situations and dangers to a parrot they would not face in the wild.

In the wild, parrots are prey animals. Much of the behavior seen in companion parrots relates to this fact. For example, disturbances such as movement or noise from behind or above, a parrot can elicit an instinctive reaction to flee from the "predator." A startled parrot is more likely to bite.

If you keep a few rules in mind, you can help yourself become a better “foster parent” to your new parrot.

RULE #1: PARROTS ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS. Incorporate your bird into your daily routine as much as possible. Do not spend a lot of extra time with him initially so that he will bond with you; he’s going to bond to you anyway. Give at least 15 min of attention in the morning before you leave for work (this can be letting the bird sit on the shower rod while you shower and get ready for work) and at least 1-2 hours in the evening when you get home from work (this can be letting them play on a playpen while you watch TV or work on the computer). Just make sure that some of the time is hands-on play or snuggling. Always greet your parrot when you first come home and let him out of his cage, if possible. You can sit and cuddle with him after you change your clothes, check the phone messages, etc.

RULE #2: NO SHOULDER. Shoulders are not acceptable bird perches. It is a very comfortable place for your bird, but “shoulder birds” often develop behavioral problems. A parrot can feel superior to you while on a shoulder and is therefore more likely to misbehave. Various body parts have been bitten when a bird becomes scared or refuses to step down from the shoulders.

RULE #3: FINGERS ARE NOT TOYS. Never let the bird (especially babies) lick, nibble, or bite your fingers. Ronies features mostly hand-fed babies that are still learning how to crack seeds and eat solid foods. When these baby birds see your fingers, they think that you are going to feed them. By allowing them to nibble on your fingers, you are teaching them it is okay to bite hands. Later when the bird is older, it will still be biting, only it will have its full beak pressure and it will hurt! By this time it is difficult (but not impossible) to reverse this habit. It is best to give the baby bird small toys to chew instead of fingers; wood pieces, leather strips, or rubber dog bones are excellent placebos for fingers. **DO NOT** scold a baby bird that starts chewing your fingers. Simply distract the bird with a suitable toy.

RULE #4: USE THE STEP-UP COMMAND. Use the “Step Up” command when you want the bird to get onto your hand and the “Down” command when you want to put the bird back down onto a perch or cage. Very young birds sometimes don’t even know how to get up onto a hand or arm, so it is necessary to use two hands to pick the bird up (you may still tell the baby bird to “step up”). Be consistent in using these commands so that your bird will automatically respond when you want to pick it up or put it down. Consistently using the up and down commands will also help to establish you as the “flock leader” and therefore the “dominant bird” in the household. Your bird will then look to you for guidance, resulting in less behavioral problems.

RULE #5: SOCIALIZE YOUR PARROT. Try to socialize your bird while it is young. Take your bird to family gatherings. Invite friends and family to handle your bird making sure that people wash their hands with soap and water before handling. (Put the bird down first, then let the next person pick it up, so that the bird does not have to choose between a more favorite person and someone else.) This early socializing may be the difference in how your bird responds to other people. Some birds bond tightly to their immediate owner or family and as far as the bird is concerned, it has no need to accept any other “members” into its flock.

RULE #6: DON’T SPOIL YOUR BIRD. Carrying your bird room to room, never leaving the bird in its cage to play, always taking your bird with you wherever you go, and always holding your bird when you are at home can lead to serious behavioral problems due to spoiling your bird. Birds that are spoiled tend to become feather pickers and scream when they hear or see their owners. Do your bird a favor, teach it to be somewhat independent so that it can entertain itself when necessary.

RULE #7: DON’T REINFORCE BAD BEHAVIOR, BUT DO REWARD GOOD BEHAVIOR. When your parrot is exhibiting an unacceptable behavior, try to figure out why your bird is doing it. Is there a certain time of day or situation that seems to elicit the behavior? Once you have figured out what is going on, you can try a distraction to change the behavior. You can distract a bird by moving it to another perch or play area,

giving it a nut to crack, ringing a toy bell in its cage, or playing a game. It is important that you do not always do the same thing, otherwise the bird may think it is being rewarded for its behavior. (Sometimes we have to outsmart them!)

If your bird likes to bite your spouse, do not laugh. If your bird tries to bite your spouse when you hand it to him or her, put the bird on the floor and walk out of the room. Now your spouse must “rescue” your bird. The bird should be more passive since it is on the floor.

Do not scold or give attention to a bird that is purposely chewing or purposely pulling on its feathers. Many birds have learned that if they chew or pull on their feathers when their owner is home, they get more attention (even though it is negative) than if they were sitting quietly in their cage. Many birds chew their feathers only when their owner is not home. In this case, provide the bird with chewable toys, leave the radio/television on, or put the bird by a window so that it may watch activity outside (providing it is not too hot or cold.)

When a bird screams, **DO NOT SCREAM BACK** at the bird or turn the volume of your television up to compete with the bird; this only makes matters worse. Birds scream for a variety of reason, including: being happy, scared, mad, or bored. You can’t eliminate screaming entirely, but you can control it. The first thing to realize is that parrots make noise! If the noise level or the duration of the screams are too much, look at when and why your parrot is vocal. First make sure that all its basic needs, like food or water, are met. Then try a distraction. Praise a bird frequently for being good, quiet, beautiful, etc. Positive reinforcement of good behavior is the best method of getting the desired behavior.

RULE #8: NEVER HIT A BIRD. It is possible to break bones or render a bird unconscious if you hit it hard enough. Thumping a bird on the beak with your finger can result in a bruise on the bird’s beak. If your bird does something terrible, fist try to think **WHY** your bird did what it did. Was he bored? Is he lonely? Birds do things for a

reason. If you need help with a bird's behavior, don't hesitate to call someone experienced in bird behavior. Don't wait until the problem gets to the point of getting rid of the bird before you address the situation.

DO NOT punish your bird for days at a time. Birds are like small children and quickly forget what they have done. They do not understand long term punishment.

RULE #9: CAGES-BIRDS NEED THEM. Many bird owners do not keep their bird in a cage because they believe it is cruel and equate it to a prison. Cages should be set up as a sanctuary for the bird, a roomy safe haven and place for rest and independent entertainment. The type, set-up, and general environment around the cage determines whether or not the cage is considered to be a good or bad place.

Ronies believes that our companion birds need a cage for their safety and well-being. Birds that have a secure and stimulating cage environment are far more content than those who do not. Like children, birds feel safe and secure when all their basic needs are satisfied and they know their boundaries, both physically and behaviorally. Your bird should not feel threatened to be placed back into its cage, even if it is for a "time-out".

RULE #10: AIR CONTAMINANTS. When a bird breathes in contaminated air, it is delivered to the bird in a concentrated form as compared to humans; they are more sensitive to air contaminants in small amounts. Common air contaminants include: smoke (cigarette and cooking), non-stick cookware, carbon monoxide, aerosols, paint, solvents, insecticide strips, mite cans, and moth balls.

Maintaining good air quality indoors is beneficial to all who reside there. Opening windows helps to freshen the air indoors; especially considering the air tight homes today. There are also many air filters available and ozone/ion machines. Indoor plants can also remove some air contaminants.