

## Rejuvenate Relationship With Your Bird

**Spend quiet time with your bird to just appreciate the company or to work on behavior issues**

*By Chris Davis*

Spend time each day to work on behavior issues with your bird.  
Courtesy Hannah Bradley, Tennessee

It's a new year, a time of changing old negative habits and starting positive new ones. This is also a wonderful opportunity for us to reassess our relationships with avian family members. For example, if any unwanted behaviors have manifested during this time, it is a good idea to address them immediately so they do not habituate and become permanent. Deal with long-existing behavior problems, too. Many of us are at home more during this time of year, making it easier to consistently reinforce our birds' positive behaviors, while discouraging their negative ones.

Altering behavior does not always have to be time-consuming. In fact, many of the strongest lessons are those that are quiet parts of everyday living, quietly constructed to create gradual positive changes. This can be a deceptively simple, yet profoundly effective, way to develop positive behaviors in all creatures, even humans. It is more of a state of being rather than what most consider a typical training technique and is one of my very favorite ways to shape behavior.

1. Start with the proper attitude, and keep things in perspective. As with any intelligent beings, most birds occasionally exhibit problem behaviors. If recognized and dealt with early, they can disappear rather quickly, especially those that are responses to changes within the environment.

Some birds have more serious problems that need to be worked with over a longer period, while other negative behaviors may never be fully resolved. Keep in mind that regardless of how serious we may believe the problem to be, most birds are not out starting fires or robbing people. Remember that occasional difficulties are simply part of living with another person or animal. As such, it is best if those problems do not take up too much of our emotional time or strength as we work with them. The more we remain upbeat, loving and happy to just be around our avian friends, the more their behavior will reflect back those healthy qualities.

2. Be respectful. My own birds and other animal friends have never been my personal "property." They are my family, my friends, and, even more importantly, my teachers. They have never failed to warm my heart and my spirit, nor have they — the good teachers that they are — ever failed to let me know when my own life or behavior is out of balance. How do they teach? I try to notice the first faint whisperings, the tiny hints and the slight hesitation before leaving the cage of a bird that usually loves coming out and visiting. Any change in a bird's habits — vocalizing, grooming or eating — can mean that something is amiss.

3. Be observant. Despite the noisy nature of parrots, in general, they are masters of subtlety and notice the slightest changes of posture or vocal intonation. This is true of all of their relationships with others, regardless if those others are human or animal.

Consequently, if I am not observant, the bird's negative behaviors will become more pronounced. Why? Not because the bird is getting "worse," but because I failed to notice the earlier hints that a human might miss but that another bird would never, ever miss. In those situations, it is my own behavior, and not the bird's, that creates, lessens or exacerbates the problem. In these types of situations, if I immediately alter my own behavior, the bird's "problem" often stops almost immediately.

4. Be quiet. In the wild, birds in flocks often "hang out" together for some time each day. It is a natural, but very important part of their behavior. Try it. It takes only a small amount of time and literally no effort; however, the benefits you gain are profound, not only for your bird but for you as well. For those of you whose lives have become a little too hectic, take the time to sit quietly with your avian friends and remember just how special they are and what they mean to you. Watch them, just watch them for a while. They are fascinating creatures, and you are lucky to share your lives with them. They can tell us so much about ourselves, if we only let them.

5. Be in the moment and enjoy it. Baby, my blue-and-gold macaw, has been with me since her weaning, more than 30 years ago. I am sad to confess that, like most people, there are times when my own life becomes so hectic that I just give her a few pets and hugs and tell her I love her without spending enough time merely being with her and watching her.

When I finally slow down, I am amazed at her grace and beauty even 30 years into our relationship. Each movement is poetry, a magical experience, a sweet moment of grace and agility ... she even poops gracefully! Seriously, and most importantly, something inside both of us shifts gears. I quickly realize how both of our lives are enriched by this simple process of being with each other and not doing much of anything other than enjoying the same space at the same time.

Allow your own feelings to adjust with the experience. Something else happens when I sit quietly with my avian friends. Priorities shuffle back to what is truly important, and I become more relaxed. I realize that all the external aggravations of the outside world will continue to be there, waxing and waning, for the rest of my life because they are life. The art of choosing to live a good life is in deciding to not allow those aggravations to consume the limited amount of time I have here or to rob me of recognizing and remembering each and every day the love and the beauty that resides in my own home, my own little sanctuary.

I offer each of you this suggestion: Even if your bird is already well-behaved, take some time several times a week to sit quietly near to her. If you usually leave her in her cage while you watch television, bring her out with you. If she becomes a rowdy little chimpanzee when seated that close to you, temporarily move her cage so that she is in your "social" space, such as where a friend would be seated with you. Watch television if you would like, but a quieter pursuit like reading and listening to some music would be good for the first few days of this exercise.

While your bird is being good and quiet, look at her intermittently, making eye contact. Be sure to tell her she is being very good and that you like her behavior. If she becomes too rowdy, simply look away or walk away. Remember to only look at or interact with her if she is well-behaved.

6. Keep it simple. Tell your bird that you love her. Thank her for being in your life and for being such a good little bird. If she does some little trick or behavior that is "good," one you find adorable, tell her that you like when she does that. Keep your voice upbeat and happy. Later on, you can have a regular play session with her.

Once your bird understands what is going on, continue only reinforcing her positive behaviors, regardless of how she is situated. If you are consistent, you will begin to see a gradual change in your bird's behavior. She may be more happily quiet and content, or her negative behavior may slowly begin to disappear until one day, it simply won't exist any longer!

It's never too late to improve a relationship, especially with those that we love the most. A little time and clear, consistent, positive reinforcement can often almost magically eliminate or transform many problem behaviors. Why not give it a try?