

Bond With A Second Cockatiel

How can we bond with our younger cockatiel?

Q: I have two male cockatiels of the ages 2 and 4, and we have a problem. We got a second cockatiel two years after our first, and the younger bird doesn't seem to be bonding with us. They also can't be separated or they'll start to screech. We had no problem bonding with the older one, but the younger one seems to hate us. Sometimes he gets angry at us and bites us, and then the older one (who has bonded to us) will start to fight him. We think it's because he doesn't like the younger one biting us. Anyhow, I would like to know how to solve this problem. Should I move them to separate rooms and take them out one at a time until the younger one bonds with us?

I would like to hear your opinion.

Linda S. Rubin explains:

Your letter states the problem clearly in the beginning; your two cockatiels "can't be separated or they'll screech." This indicates that your cockatiels have now bonded with one another. Your letter also reads that the younger cockatiel is now 2 years old. Although two years have now passed and your bird has bonded with another cockatiel instead of you, it is not too late to tame your bird.

The younger 2-year old cockatiel is now at full adulthood but his biting would suggest that his hormone levels are rising and with it a desire to pair bond and breed. The biological urge to reproduce at this age is very strong and even the tamest of companion cockatiels can become agitated biters or nippy with their owners. While untamed cockatiels that have never bonded with their owners may be more fearful compared to tame birds, they are also more challenging to work with, especially when they are in breeding condition.

Although we tend to anthropomorphize our own feelings onto our birds, the reason your older bird fights with the younger cockatiel that bites you might be due to transferred aggression. This style of breeding agitation is actually displaced aggression directed toward a mate or chicks, and is brought on by stress (for example, the stimulus of your presence and the reactive behavior of the younger cockatiel biting you causes your older cockatiel to react). This is a plausible explanation if you are convinced your older cockatiel is also pair bonded to the younger cockatiel. Pair bonding between male cockatiels, even in the presence of an available female, is not altogether uncommon.

I do not recommend separating your cockatiels, which can add to their daily stress, especially if they are within earshot of one another, as it will only cause them to call to each other repeatedly. However, when you are ready to work with the younger cockatiel, you will have to remove him to a different area during training sessions. The daily move to the training environment will work in your favor by putting your cockatiel at a temporary disadvantage by transferring it to unfamiliar surroundings for a short period each day. Choose a small room with doors and windows locked and mirrors covered. Have an avian veterinarian or professional handler trim your bird's wing feathers to prevent your bird flying into the wall at breakneck speed during these sessions. If your birds call out to each other, cover the older cockatiel's cage to quiet him during these short training sessions while you work with the younger cockatiel.

Start with basic techniques, allowing your cockatiel to become used to associating your hand and fingers with his favorite foods, and move extremely slowly (as if you were in slow motion) whenever approaching the cage, opening the cage door or offering your hand and special treats to come within beak's reach. Keep training sessions short; 10 to 15 minutes, once or twice a day, and gradually increase the training over time. My suggestion is to wait until your cockatiel is not quite so nippy and his hormone levels have decreased and then begin training. Although your younger cockatiel is a full adult, never allow anyone to tell you that an older cockatiel can't be tamed. Patience has its rewards, and there are many stories of even elderly cockatiels that have tamed down with a commitment to training over time.