

Loving Your Pet Bird To Death?

A parrot behavior expert defines what "loving" your pet bird really means.

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Courtesy Samantha Jenny, California

A parrot behavior expert defines "love" as doing what is best for a pet bird in a human habitat.

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Unlike the English language, the Greeks have four words for love, exemplifying the variety of forms this complex emotion can take. To my knowledge, however, there is no Greek word for the kind of "love" that this column addresses.

When I mentioned to my colleagues in the parrot division of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (www.iaabc.org) that I was doing a column on the negative aspects of "love" when dealing with companion parrot behavior, a lively discussion ensued. Input for this article was graciously provided by several certified members, including Chairperson Kashmir Csaky, Hilla Neiman in Germany, Dr. Jan Hooimeijer (avian veterinarian in the Netherlands), and Jamie Whitaker of ABC Birds in Texas.

Examples we collected of what many owners called "love" ran a wide gamut. There were those who refused to get their birds on good diets despite life-threatening malnutrition because, "They don't like to eat that stuff"; owners who never caged their parrots (despite the known hazards of the human habitat) because the birds don't want to go in their cages; owners who never go on vacation because they think their birds will be too upset (setting themselves up for future resentment); owners who, despite multiple emergency room visits due to serious injuries, continue to allow a biting parrot to shoulder because "He likes to sit there!" Most common were owners who set no boundaries on their parrots' behavior no matter how bad it gets, because they claim to "love" the birds and want them to be as "free" as possible.

Among the most frustrating situations were owners who insist on keeping a parrot despite the reality that it is not working for them or the bird ("I'm a forever home!"); owners who refused to euthanize a bird that is suffering because they "love" the bird so much. And strangest of all to me were the owners who "love" their birds so much that their wills state their parrots be euthanized upon the owner's death. (This was because "no one can provide the care that I do.")

The general consensus of the parrot division members was that these were dangerous examples of "love." Indeed, there's less work involved in being permissive of negative behavior instead of working to resolve it (e.g. allowing a parrot free-roam because it's too much of a hassle to get it back to its cage), or the owner might not be aware of the ramifications of ignoring important boundaries. After all, there is more work involved in being a good parent than a so-called "bad" one, and the same applies to being a good parrot owner.

Good Manners Go A Long Way

As an example of this, our newest parrot division member, Associate Lisa Bono (owner of The Platinum Parrot in Barnegat, New Jersey) said she frequently deals with owners who feel they don't have to fix their parrots' behavior problems because they will never give them up. Bono tries to get them to understand that we can't always control what happens in our lives, and if we haven't fixed problem behaviors, then we are setting our parrots up to fail in their next home. This is totally unacceptable!

Instead, it's our responsibility as owners to teach our parrots good manners. As Bono said, "I want to know that should something happen to me, [my greys] will be readily accepted and successful in their new homes."

Most importantly, these permissive forms of "love" show absolutely no respect for the parrots themselves, and this is crucial. As a psychiatrist taught me years ago, relationships based only on love never survive. Relationships based on mutual respect do.

We parrot people need to learn to respect parrots for what they are, not what we wish them to be. Nature did not design them to fill a void in our personal lives. We need to respect our adult parrots not as "feathered kids," but as the sexually mature creatures that they are. Parrot behavior consultants talk about parrots being perennial 2-year-olds or "stuck in the

Terrible Twos” due to their megalomaniac, Me! Me! Me! approach to life — not because they stay children.

Instead, as Dr. Hooimeijer said, they are adult, “non-domesticated, social, intelligent prey animals that are kept under unnatural circumstances in captivity.” Indeed, they are not so much our “companion animals” but instead magnificent members of their species that happen to share our lives.

Tough Love

As an example of what I define as real love was a situation I encountered with my own blue-and-gold macaw Sam. Thirty years ago, Sam started getting multiple bacterial infections. When I finally realized (and I can be really dumb) that this was evidence of underlying malnutrition, I determined to convert her from seed to a new product being marketed at the time — formulated parrot food or so-called “pellets.” She staunchly refused at first and acted pathetic. Her preferred tactic was to constantly say, “Cracker? Cracker?” in a pitiful little voice, like she was dying.

However, I refused to be manipulated and she (somehow) managed to survive the transition. Some people opined that this was a “mean” thing for me to do, but I fervently disagree. Indeed, the opposite was true. I loved her entirely too much to allow her poor food preferences to further damage her health. (As an aside, she has not, knock on wood, been sick once in the 30 years since.)

Loving a parrot means doing what is best for the pet bird in the human habitat. This includes such things as insisting that the pet bird learn to respect boundaries, to avoid aggression by finding less belligerent means of communication and to eat a nutritious diet. “Love” is never justification for laziness or ignorance on the part of owners. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines tough love as “affectionate concern expressed in a stern or unsentimental manner ... especially to promote responsible behavior.” Regarding parrots, doing what is best isn’t “tough love.” Instead, it is, in my opinion, the only way true love should be expressed. And you know what? Your parrots will love you for it.