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ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT ALLIANCE CONFERENCE 2015 PRESENTATION

A Birds' Eye View- A Breakdown in Relations between Parrot and Caregiver

The keeping of parrots as companion pets is rapidly growing in popularity, and they are often perceived as easier to care for than dogs –after all, you don't have to walk a parrot, right? But, often, purchasing a parrot is an impulsive response to media exposure of exceptional parrots; real or animated, who converse, dance, sing, perform tricks, and relish petting and snuggling by caregivers. Consequently, caregivers' expectations are often unrealistic, and disappointment ensues when reality fails to match expectations. Many caregivers are disappointed with parrot behavioural issues of extreme vocalization, handling problems, property destruction, and aggression toward the very caregiver providing food and adoration.

Parrot caregivers are more likely to tolerate lesser-perceived problems like destruction and noise when they have either formed a tactile bond with their parrot or the parrot's aggression toward them is minimal. Caregivers often approach their parrot relationship from a human perspective, rather than the parrots.

This presentation explores reasons (the term differentials is often used by UK behaviourists) for aggression directed toward caregivers and household members, when they attempt to physically interact with the parrot, and consequences that lack of touch may have on the caregiver-parrot relationship.

Lennox & Harrison (2006) suggest that caregivers develop a deep attachment to their parrots. The theory of attachment, developed extensively by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1989), has been

extended to include pets. The original theory outlines humans' innate need for emotional attachment and they seek out those social bonds. People become attached to other people but also become emotionally attached to non-human animals, which researchers cite as a source of social support (e.g. Serpell, 2002). Particularly, Collis and McNicholas (1998) argued that pets provide humans with a sense of safety and security and a relationship perhaps unavailable with other people.

This view of pets' importance for security is also supported by Cusack (1988), as a socially acceptable "security blanket." The pet makes the owner feel safe while the parent/loved one is away. Not only can pets provide security, but also they provide support or even replace the love absent from family or friends (Okoniewski, 1984).

Often given the term FIDs (feathered kids), parrots are considered part of the family by many caregivers, taking part in celebrations such as "hatch-days" (Anderson, 2003). On the flip side, increasing numbers of parrots are relinquished into rescue organizations (Salman et al., 2000). Aggression, screaming, and feather picking are the most common behavioural problems reported to avian vets (Gaskins & Bergman, 2011). Lacking understanding of parrot behaviour, communication, and their physiological/social needs may lead to impaired welfare (Anderson, 2014) of both physiological and psychological wellbeing.

The sense of touch is very important to humans, who may use this for both discrimination and emotionality to convey feelings of affection (McGlone, F. et al., 2007). According to Keltner (2010), touch, fundamental to bonding is a primary means by which humans communicate compassion to one another. Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, in the first study that considered the effects of touch deprivation in adults, found that touch deprivation decreased humans' self-esteem and increased depression. Similarly, touch is essential to human-non-human relationships (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Reduced blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate were recorded in humans petting an unknown cat or dog (Baun et al., 1984).

Touch between conspecifics is important in parrot social relationships, especially between pair-bonded individuals (Seibert, 2006). However, most physical contact between adult parrots is for courtship and mating purposes (Van Sant, 2006), although mutual grooming around the head area is often observed among non-pair-bonded parrots and juveniles. It is not known if touch deprivation with parrots in captivity, or lacking access to conspecifics or touch relationship with caregivers, has a

significant effect on a parrot's emotional wellbeing.

Parrots in captivity display two categories of behaviours: self-maintenance (for physical and emotional well-being) and social behaviour (to convey information to caregivers and/or other humans/animals in the household). Aggressive behaviour can be delivered using a signal to the receiver, resulting in a benefit to the sender or a display to convey a specific message. Parrots that have lost trust in humans or have not habituated at an early age to human touch are most likely to use aggressive signals and ritual displays when confronted with outstretched human hands. As a last resort, when both signals and rituals are ignored, the parrot may bite; the outstretched hand is then withdrawn and the parrot quickly learns that biting behaviour works to prevent handling by a human. Caregivers become distressed when confronted by a biting parrot whom they just wish to touch to convey an emotional bond and/or because they are simply humans being humans. As noted, physical contact is a primary manner in which humans communicate and convey affection, and caregivers sometimes forget humans' responsibility to adapt to the world of the parrot, rather than vice versa.

Parrots who don't wish to be touched, cuddled, or handled by caregivers are often labelled as "mean, vicious, dominant, punishing" (Friedman et al., 2006), or "wanting to burn the world." Although these constructs are unhelpful in understanding why parrots bite, their use informs us of negative feelings caregivers have towards their parrots who bite them. These feelings are perhaps intensified when caregivers are bombarded with images of the perfect parrot who understands language and speaks, performs amazing tricks, and snuggles and cuddles with caregivers. Caregiver-directed aggression is often cited as one reason for parrot relinquishment to rescue societies (Bird Line, 2015) or referral to an animal behaviour counsellor. Frequent question on Internet forums and Facebook groups relate to caregiver-directed aggression. The quality of advice from these sources varies and depends on caregivers' providing sufficient information on parrot's early rearing environment and its habituation to humans; medical, learning, training, and behavioural history; and the advisor's depth of knowledge. The quality of "professional" advice available may also be questionable. Unfortunately, the animal behaviourist/trainer's role is largely unregulated, and the experience, quality, and depth of knowledge of some practitioners are questionable.

Unless working with a parrot on an individual basis, behavioural counsellors must possess excellent interpersonal skills to empower caregivers to effect changes in their own behaviour necessary to decrease the parrot's unwanted behaviour. It has been stated that client-therapist relationship is the

prime determinant of therapeutic process outcomes, (Rogers et al., 1967). Thus, practitioners must heed their clients' thoughts, feelings, and actions; and a complete therapy must address all these facets (Corey, 2008). Additionally, counsellors should be culturally sensitive, that is, they should be cognizant of the divergence between their worldview and of their clients' (Ponterotto et al., 2001).

The ability to take good history is central to all aspects of counselling, and it can even be argued that it is a counsellor's most essential skill (Bowen & Heath, 2005). Moreover, questions should be open ended and suggestion free (Knol, 1993). Hart and his colleagues (2006) confirmed the importance for the counsellor to address and explain the problem's aetiology to clients, as this might affect their moods and engagement with the process (Forgas, 1999). Campbell (2008) indicated that planning a behavioural modification programme with clients helps reduce their anxiety about the programme; and, ideally, at least one follow-up or progress check should follow the initial appointment (Hart et al., 2006). Hart and his colleagues (2006) believe that a written copy is advantageous to the client and keeps the client's educational needs in mind.

There may be many reasons why an animal behaves as it does; in the UK, these reasons are often termed differentials- from the medical model of analysis. Differentials for aggression and biting directed towards caregivers and other humans when the parrot is touched may include ill-health, light reflection on jewellery or spectacles, lack of appropriate socialisation to some people and genders, lack of touch/handling habituation while a chick, inappropriate training histories or experiences, multiple/single traumatic events, etc. Also included in this list are inappropriate diet, hormonal influences, lack of bonding with caregivers, environmental stress, genetic influences on behaviour, fear-provoking environment, or unreasonable behaviour of caregivers and/or others from the parrot's view. Many parrots in captivity will have been wild caught, and the experience may have been mentally damaging to them (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Bradshaw et al., 2009).

The behaviour consultation involves the counsellor considering all appropriate differentials for unwanted behaviour and then devising a programme appropriate to the needs of both parrot and caregiver. Circumstances of each and every parrot and caregiver will be different and individual; therefore, success may be more likely when each is given a unique behaviour modification programme. Client expectations must be managed so that realistic and achievable goals are met. In the case of caregiver-directed aggression, it is the counsellor's responsibility to formulate a behaviour modification plan that will improve the parrot-human trust bond before the actual work of

desensitisation and counter conditioning to touch can begin. While this will not replace the caregivers' need to touch their parrot, establishing a short-term "boast" or "brag"—(i.e. teaching caregivers how to teach their parrot simple tricks, like "high five") can give the caregiver confidence to continue with behaviour modification and delight in their companion pet's trick. The more we enhance our caregivers' behaviour, the more empowered they will feel.

In summary, when faced with parrot aggression, caregivers should realize that many variables affect the parrot's attitude and behaviour and, therefore, it is essential that clients seek assistance of a qualified counsellor to provide solutions to their concerns. However, it is especially important that behavioural counsellors be experienced and skilled in their profession and sufficiently sensitive to parrot and caregiver needs to develop a behavioural modification programme that will achieve the caregiver's goals and attain the most desirable outcome.

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