

# A bird's eye view of breakdown in parrot–caregiver relations

This article explores the reasons (the term differentials is often used by UK behaviourists) for aggression by pet parrots 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. It also outlines the role of a properly trained behaviourist in explaining the aggressive behaviour to the parrot's owner and developing a behaviour modification plan appropriate to the needs of both the parrot and the caregiver. Each owner–parrot relationship is individual, therefore an individual plan is required for each case; it is beyond the scope of this article to detail such plans.

10.12968/coan.2018.23.2.92

**Elaine Henley** PGDip CAB, Full Member Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors, Animal Behaviour & Training Council (ABTC) Registered Clinical Animal Behaviourist, Certified Parrot Behaviour Consultant (IAABC)

**Key words:** parrot | aggression | parrot behaviour | human-parrot bond

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. However, 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 have problems with parrot behavioural issues of extreme vocalisation, handling problems, property destruction, and aggression toward the very caregiver providing food and adoration.

Parrot caregivers are more likely to tolerate lesser problems such as 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 relationship with their parrot from a human perspective, rather than the parrot's.

Lennox and 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 that people seek out 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). In particular, 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 they also 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). At the same time, increasing numbers of parrots are being relinquished to rescue organisations (Hoppes and Gray, 2010). Aggression, screaming, and feather picking are the most common behavioural problems reported to veterinary surgeons treating birds (Gaskins and Bergman, 2011). Lack of understanding of parrot behaviour, communication and their physiological/social needs may lead to impaired welfare (Anderson, 2014) in terms of both the physiological and psychological wellbeing of pet parrots.

## The importance of touch In humans

The sense of touch is very important to humans, who may use this for both discrimination and emotionality to convey feelings of affection (McGlone et al, 2007). According to Keltner (2010), touch — which is fundamental to bonding — is a primary means by which humans communicate compassion to one another. In the first study that considered the effects of touch deprivation in adults, Punyanunt-Carter and Wrench (2009) found that touch deprivation decreased humans' self-esteem and increased depression. Similarly, touch is essential to human–nonhuman

relationships (Beck and Katcher, 1996). Reduced blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate were recorded in humans petting an unknown cat or dog (Baun et al, 1984).

### In parrots

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, mating, and chick raising purposes (Van Sant, 2006), (Figure 1) although mutual grooming around the head area is often observed among non-pair-bonded parrots and juveniles, (Figure 2). It is not known if touch deprivation, or lack of access to mutual grooming with conspecifics or a touch relationship with caregivers, has a significant effect on a captive parrot's emotional wellbeing and therefore subsequent behavioural problems including caregiver-directed aggression. Meehan et al (2003) found that when parent-reared parrots were housed in isosexual pair (same-sex pair) housing from 6 months of age, rather than singly, they spent less time screaming, inactive or grooming, and used enrichment more, than those housed singly, which they suggest indicates improved welfare. They also responded less fearfully and aggressively towards unfamiliar handlers during the study, although there was no difference in their response to familiar handlers (all the parrots were handled regularly) whether housed in pairs or individually.

### Parrot behaviours

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 is a type of social behaviour. Aggressive behaviour can be delivered using a signal to the receiver, resulting in a benefit to the sender, or as 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 more 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.

### Caregiver responses to parrots' aggressive behaviours

Caregivers become distressed when confronted by a biting parrot that 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 that do not wish to be touched, cuddled, or handled by caregivers are often labelled as 'mean, vicious, dominant, punishing' (Friedman et al, 2006) (Figure 3 and 4).

Although these labels are unhelpful in understanding why parrots bite, their use informs us regarding the negative feelings caregivers have towards their parrots who bite them. These



Figure 1. Two wild grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) at the entrance to their nest. The female does not leave the nest; the male will come and feed her and groom her, and she in turn feeds their chick. Further up on the tree, other greys keep watch for predators such as the African hawk-eagle (*Aquila spilogaster*), who whilst not directly challenging the parrot parents will seize the chance to take the chick if the nest is left unprotected. Enkusu Village, Uganda, 2017. (Copyright Elaine Henley)



Figure 2. Wild grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) congregate at Enkusu Village, Uganda, each morning to socialise with each other in the tree tops; as well as individual preening sessions, non-bonded parrots were observed preening each other, particularly around the head. (Copyright Elaine Henley)

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 and very rarely even rarely other people, outwith the immediate social group (Figure 5 and 6). 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.

### Sources of information for parrot owners/caregivers

Frequent questions on internet forums and Facebook groups relate to caregiver-directed aggression. The quality of advice from these



Figure 3. Bitten finger of a parrot caregiver. Caregiver comment: 'Frank did this just over a week ago and it's nearly healed now. I'm not sure why he did this. He often takes hold of my finger in the morning but this is the first time he's done this for no apparent reason. I was angry with him for doing this and also hurt. He has been forgiven.'



Figure 4. Bitten finger of a parrot caregiver. Caregiver comment: 'I wanted to show him affection and when he bit me instead of allowing me to scratch his head, I felt rejected. Why didn't he understand that what I was doing was a loving action? I wanted to scold him and reject him in return – put him back in his cage for punishment. It took everything in me to suffer in silence and still be nice to him. I so wanted him to love me and understand me.'

sources varies, and depends on caregivers providing sufficient information on a parrot's early rearing environment and its habituation to humans as well as 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.

### Registered practitioners

The Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) exists to promote excellence in animal behaviour and training, and comprises 33 member organisations that have all agreed on a professional standard of educational and practical competencies for individuals who may be registered as Clinical or Accredited



Figure 5. JoJo who lives with Irene Forrester, is an unusual grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) who enjoys visiting a local hospice where he will cuddle patients, and allow them to touch him. Doctors and nurses have been amazed at how his presence has enhanced the patients lives, who all look forward to his visits.



Figure 6. It is likely that one of the reasons for Odin (a grey parrot, *Psittacus erithacus*) being rehomed to his caregiver Ian, was caregiver-directed aggression. Ian reports that the only time that Odin will show affection towards him is when Ian and Odin have returned home after visiting a relative. Ian accepts the relationship rules that Odin has set – no touching, other than at this time – and delights in his other antics.

behaviourists. Registered ABTC practitioners recognise that there is a strong link between medical problems and behavioural problems, and thus work on referral from a veterinary surgeon; or, in cases where they have been contacted by caregivers independently of their veterinary surgeon, they will insist that the parrot is seen by a veterinary surgeon before referral to the behaviourist. However, parrots are very good at hiding signs of pain and ill health, so a lack of overt clinical signs of illness should not be assumed to indicate that all is physically well with the bird.

### Skills required

Unless working with a parrot on an individual basis, behavioural counsellors must possess excellent interpersonal skills to empower caregivers to effect the changes in their own behaviour necessary to decrease the parrot's unwanted behaviour. It has been stated that the 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 cognisant of the divergence between their world view and that of their clients (Ponterotto et al, 2001).

The ability to take a 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 and Heath, 2005). Moreover, questions should be open-ended and suggestion-free (Knol, 1993). Hart et al (2006) confirmed the importance of the counsellor addressing and explaining 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 et al (2006) believe that a written copy of both the behavioural report, which explains the development and maintenance of the behavioural problem and the behaviour modification plan, is advantageous to the client and keeps the client's educational needs in mind. A copy of the behaviour report should be sent to the parrot's veterinary surgeon; this should include the initiating and maintaining factors for the behaviour as well as the behaviour modification plan.

### Determining the differentials

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; and multiple/single traumatic events. 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.

An inability to retreat from unwanted touch or approach by either a caregiver or another person, as well as past experiences, are both important considerations. Apart from having evolved a pulmonary and cardiovascular system that has been designed for coping with flight, parrots have evolved to use their skill in flight behaviourally: flight is their primary means of locomotion (Figure 7), which parrots may employ as a form of defence to escape predation or a frightening stimulus. Removing the option for normal flight within the household, by way of wing clipping,



Figure 7. Milo, a grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*), lives with the author and her family. Milo, who has always been able to fly, is able to make choices as to whether he wishes to engage with his caregivers or not; his choices are respected.

will increase the likelihood of defensive aggressive behaviours. One reason given for wing clipping parrots is to ensure that they can not fly away if windows or doors are left open; however, even wing clipped parrots may fly if sufficiently startled, and they are less likely to survive on their own outside as they have compromised flying ability. A small cage also removes the parrot's ability to retreat from unwanted touch or approach, even if it is fully flighted.

Many parrots in captivity have been wild caught, and the experience may have been mentally damaging to them (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) (Bradshaw et al, 2009). Likewise captive-bred parrots, both parent reared and hand reared, may also have experienced stress associated with approach and handling by a human and thus have formed negative association with humans before going to live with their caregivers

### Aims of the behaviour modification programme

The behaviour consultation involves the counsellor's considering all appropriate reasons for unwanted behaviour and then devising a programme appropriate to the needs of both parrot and caregiver. The 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. Often, this involves teaching caregivers how to teach their parrot simple tricks, such as 'high five'. While this generally will not replace the caregivers' need to touch their parrot, establishing a short-term 'boast' or 'brag' (i.e. a trick that they have taught their parrot and can be pleased about) can give the caregiver confidence to continue with behaviour modification and delight in their companion pet's trick; an example is given in *Box 1*. The more we enhance our caregivers' behaviour, the more empowered they will feel.

**Box 1. Case report: Ray**

Roy is a 32-year-old DNA tested male grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) who came to live with me 4 years ago, after he had been abandoned in a small dog cage inside a dog cage inside a garage for the previous 3 years, following the death of his primary caregiver. Emotionally shut down, and a self-mutilator, Roy had a fear of hands coming towards him, his perch or his cage. In addition to behavioural medicine, increased environmental enrichment and removing his cage door, Roy was taught that positive things happen when people approach him. Roy now welcomes and tolerates his family coming close to him, walking past him and he will even seek me out to sit beside me. However, Roy does not welcome being touched on his body and I respect his wishes by not touching him; instead I have taught him to flap his wings, stand on one foot, turn around and wave. Both Roy and I enjoy these fun interactions. (Photo copyright, Mutley's Snaps-Pet Photography).

**Conclusions**

When faced with parrot aggression, caregivers need to understand that many variables affect the parrot's attitude and behaviour. Therefore it is essential that clients seek the assistance of a qualified counsellor to provide solutions to their concerns, while setting realistic and achievable goals for both caregiver and parrot. It is especially important that behavioural counsellors be experienced

**KEY POINTS**

- Parrots are not domesticated animals; even those bred in captivity are only one or two generations removed from the wild, thus they retain all of their wild bird instincts and behaviours.
- Caregivers' expectations for their relationship with their parrot is often unrealistic and caregivers may quickly become disappointed.
- Caregivers often approach their parrot relationship from a human perspective, rather than the parrot's.
- Animal Behaviour and Training Council behavioural practitioners recognise that there is a strong link between medical problems and behavioural problems and thus work on referral from, or with, a veterinary surgeon.
- The behaviour consultation involves the counsellor's considering all appropriate reasons for unwanted behaviour, then devising a programme appropriate to the needs of both parrot and caregiver.

and skilled in their profession and sufficiently sensitive to parrot and caregiver needs, in order to not only determine the cause of the aggressive behaviour, but also to explain this to the client in a way that they can understand and accept, and to develop a behavioural modification programme that will be beneficial for both caregiver and parrot. **CA**

**Conflict of interest:** No conflict of interest.

**References**

- Ainsworth MDS. Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*. 1989; 44 (4): 709–716
- Anderson PK. A bird in the house: An anthropological perspective on companion parrots. *Society & Animals*. 2003;11: 393–418
- Anderson PK. Social dimensions of the human-avian bond: parrots and their persons. *Anthrozoos*. 2014;27(3):371–387
- Baun MM, Bergstrom N, Langston NE, Thoma L. Physiological effects of human/companion animal bonding. *Nurs Res* 1984;33(3): 126–129
- Beck AM, Katcher AH. *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*. Revised edition. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press; 1996
- Bowen J, Heath S. *Behaviour Problems in Small Animals: practical advice for the veterinary team*. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Ltd; 2005
- Bowlby J. *Attachment*. 2nd Edition. New York, NY: Basic Books; 1969
- Bradshaw G A, Yenkosky J P, McCarthy E. Avian affective dysregulation: psychiatric models and treatment for parrots in captivity. Proceedings of the 30th Annual Association of Avian Veterinarians Conference. 10–13 August 2009. Milwaukee, WI
- Campbell WE. *Dog behaviour problems: The counsellor's handbook*. Dogswell Publishing, Wenatchee, WA; 2008
- Collis GM, McNicholas J. A theoretical basis for health benefits of pet ownership: Attachment versus psychological support. In: Wilson CC, Turner DC, editors. *Companion Animals in Human Health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1998
- Corey G. *Theory and practice of counselling & psychotherapy*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; 2008
- Cusack O. *Pets and Mental Health*. London: Haworth Press; 1988
- Forgas JP. On feeling good and being rude: affective influences on language use and request formulations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1999; 76(6): 928–939
- Friedman S G, Martin S, Brinker B. Behavior analysis and parrot learning. In: Luescher AU, editor. *Manual of Parrot Behavior*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; 2006. 147–163
- Gaskins LA, Bergman L. Surveys of avian practitioners and pet owners regarding common behavior problems in psittacine birds. *J Avian Med Surg*. 2011;25(2):111–118
- Hart BL, Hart LA, Bain M. *Canine and Feline Behavioral Therapy*. Ames, IO: Blackwell Publishing; 2006
- Hoppes S, Gray P. Parrot rescue organizations and sanctuaries: a growing presence in 2010. *Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine*. 2010;19(2):133–139
- Keltner D. Hands On Research: The science of touch. *Greater Good Magazine* [Internet]. 29 September 2010 [Cited 13 March 2017]. Available from: [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/hands\\_on\\_research](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/hands_on_research)
- Knol BW (1993). A veterinary-ethological approach to problem behaviour in dogs. *Bulletin on Veterinary Clinical Ethology*. 1:7–11
- Lennox AM, Harrison GJ. *The Companion Bird*. In: Harrison GL, Lightfoot TL, editors. *Clinical Avian Medicine*. Palm Beach, FL: Spix Publishing Inc; 2006. p26–44
- Meehan CL, Garner JP, Mench JA. Isosexual pair housing improves the welfare of young Amazon parrots. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 2003;81:73–88
- McGlone F, Vallbo AB, Olsson H, Loken L, Wessberg J. Discriminative touch and emotional touch. *Can J Exp Psychol*. 2007;61(3):173–183
- Okoniewski L. A comparison of human-human and human-animal relationships. In: Anderson RK, Hart, BL, Hart, LA, editors. *The Pet Connection*. Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press; 1984: p251–259
- Ponterotto JG, Casas JM, Suzuki LA, Alexander CM. *Handbook of Multicultural Counselling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2001
- Punyanunt-Carter NM, Wrench JS. Development and validity testing of a measure of touch deprivation. *Human Communication: A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association*. 2009; 12(1):67–76.
- Rogers CR, Gendlin ET, Kiesler DJ, Truax, CB. *The Therapeutic Relationship and Its Impact: A Study of Psychotherapy with Schizophrenics*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 1967
- Salman MD, Hutchison J, Ruch-Gallie R, et al. Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. 2000;3(2): 93–106
- Seibert L 2006. Social behavior of psittacine birds. In: Luescher AU, editor. *Manual of Parrot Behavior*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; 2006. p43–48
- Serpell JA. Anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic selection-beyond the "cute response". *Society and Animals*. 2002; 0: 437–453
- Van Sant F. Problem sexual behaviors of companion parrots. In: Luescher AU, editor. *Manual of Parrot Behavior*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; 2006. p233–246