

## Respecting The Bite



I am a wuss. I admit it. Oddly enough I think it has worked in my favor when it comes to working with animals. I don't "take the bite" whether it is from a mosquito, a parrot or a lion. In fact I do everything in power to avoid a situation in which I might get bit. With mosquitoes sadly it usually means very little camping for me and when outdoors I am bathed in massive doses of repellent. With zoo animals such as lions, it usually means training through barriers and offering reinforcers via utensils, and avoiding creating aggressive behavior. With parrots.....believe it or not I actually take an approach similar to what I do with lions! Not because I think parrots pose a particular lethal threat to my person, but because I respect a parrot as much as I respect a lion. Let me repeat that "I respect a parrot as much as I respect a lion."

### RESPECT

To understand this better perhaps I should elaborate on what I mean by "respect". I interpret this as showing consideration for what an animal is telling me with its body language. For example if my close proximity to an animal is creating the slightest fear response or hint of aggressive behavior I recognize it and acknowledge it. I then do whatever I can, which may include backing away, to put that animal at ease. Sometimes humans have an inclination to suggest that whatever activity they are doing is "no big deal" or should not be bothersome to their parrot and forge ahead, regardless of what their bird's body language is saying. There are countless times I have heard someone say "Oh, he doesn't really mind. Go ahead." or "He is just being stubborn. Make him step up." or "It's just a bluff. He isn't really aggressive." Ouch. Those are painful words more painful than a bite to a positive reinforcement trainers ears. There is an implication in those statements that I should ignore what the bird's body language is telling me. Even if that body language is saying "No! Stop it. I don't like what you are doing."



Why should a parrot owner care about respecting their bird's body language? Because it is a critical element in successfully addressing biting behavior. I would surmise that most people do not want to get bit by a parrot. I am certainly one who falls into that category. This is when being a wimp works to my advantage. I am not willing to get too close to a bird until it gives me body language that indicates comfort. Certainly this is step one in avoiding a bite. My next goal is usually to associate some sort of positive reinforcer with my presence. This may mean offering food treats from my hand, a spoon or a bowl. It may also include offering toys or enrichment, head scratches or praise. It all depends on what the parrot shows a preference for. By pairing a positive reinforcer with my presence, hopefully I will gain some positively reinforcing value for the parrot. If I am successful I usually start to see a parrot whose body language indicates he is anticipating more "good stuff" coming from me. Woohoo! At this point not only does the parrot seem to be engaged, but I am usually also beginning to feel more confident and trusting of the bird.

Needless to say there are other scenarios in which a parrot might be inclined to place a beak to human flesh, for example when a parrot does not want to return to his cage. For an excellent case study of this very situation check out "The S Files" in this issue. Lee McGuire and Susan Friedman Ph D share a systematic approach that can be applied to any behavior problem. The template helps owners delve deep into the details of the elements that are contributing to the presentation of the problem behavior. Following this format can give caregivers oodles of avenues to explore to modify undesired behavior.



### **WHEN BIRDS BITE**

Shoot. I messed up. Either I misread the bird's body language or I asked for too much, or maybe I simply don't know what happened just yet. But I got bit. Now what? This is a question that is often posed to me. "What do you do when the bird bites?" If unfortunately a caregiver does get bit, the first immediate response in my opinion is to detach the bird from the person. If the bird is holding on, usually a thumb and forefinger can be placed on the top part of the beak to pry the parrot off of whatever is in their mouth. Other strategies can include redirecting the parrot's attention, and simply putting the bird down in the nearest available safe

location (perch, cage, couch, table, play stand, etc.)

A bite can be very painful and by all means I do not recommend holding steady while a bird chomps away. This is the erroneous idea that by taking the bite the caregiver will teach the bird that biting has no effect. In truth there can be other reinforcers that maintain that behavior over which we have no control. For example grinding away on flesh may provide a stimulating tactile sensation to the bird. The only way to remove that reinforcer is for the bird to not have human flesh in its beak.



Another question often presented to me is “How do you let the parrot know what he did was wrong?” I must admit

this question makes me cringe a bit. This is because I see it as a request for approval to use aversives to punish a bird for biting. In reality in most cases aversive punishment would not be the strategy of choice to address biting. The primary goal would have been to avoid creating the situation in which the parrot would be inclined to bite in the first place. This may mean teaching the bird what to do instead of what not to do. It may also mean making antecedent changes to facilitate success for the parrot. There are many pathways that can lead to a non biting outcome had they been considered. All of which do not involve an unpleasant experience to teach the bird to do something other than bite.



For me if a parrot bites I do nothing than more than make sure the bird is no longer on me. This gives me time to pause and think about what I could have done differently to avoid the situation. It also forces me to make a mental note of what circumstances created the aggressive response. It also gives me time to deal with any emotional

fall out I may experience from being bit. Sometimes our feelings our hurt when an animal we love responds with aggressive behavior. If I am to focus on building trust with a parrot, the last thing I want to do is to react in a manner that the bird would find unpleasant. This means I do not try to punish the parrot by shaking or dropping my hand, yelling “no”, waving a finger in his face, or flicking his beak. All of these would very likely damage my efforts to build a successful relationship with the parrot.

## CONCLUSION

At a recent conference I overheard a conversation in which it was whispered “I bet she never gets bit.” In truth I can’t say it never happens, but it is extremely rare. It is certainly not from a lack of interacting with parrots. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to meet 100’s of new animals each year. However with each animal I am careful to read body language and to do my best to build a relationship based on trust. I take advantage of any positive reinforcers the animal likes and use these to help increase my worth to my training subject. I am happy to report it is

not magic, nor does it take any super powers, or “whispering” techniques. Anyone can have a successful bite free relationship with a parrot when they give their parrot the same respect they would give a lion.

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