



from the FORUMS

This issue's contributor, **Pamela Clark**, is a well-known author, speaker, and parrot behaviour consultant whose experience with parrots dates back 40 years to the purchase of her first pair of lovebirds. Her special interests include feather destructive behaviour, training, flight and nutrition.

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A well-rounded life for these young African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithicus*) requires an understanding of their basic physical and social needs.

From Debra
United Arab Emirates

I have a wonderful African Grey that is now about ten months old. She is a gentle, kind accepting bird and is generally a joy to have.

I have 2 questions: First: Her feathers are so soft! Will this change when she gets older? Second: I have been told that there is a period known as the "Terrible Twos" when birds change dramatically. I don't want to lose the gentle girl I have. What would you recommend I do? Should I start exerting more control over her now so she knows who is in control? Thank you for any help.

From Pamela Clark
Oregon, USA

Your baby Grey is exceptionally lucky to be in the hands of someone like you who seeks to prevent problems, rather than wait to get help until they occur.

The fact that her feathers are soft reflects the fact that she has been well-nourished. The diet a parrot eats dictates the quality of the plumage. The best way to keep her feathers soft is to make sure that you feed her the most appropriate diet. A seed mix is a poor diet for any parrot, so if she is currently eating a seed mix as a staple, you will want to teach her to eat a better quality diet.

African Greys have higher needs for protein and fat than many other parrot species. The easiest way to make sure that she is eating a well-balanced diet is to make sure that at least 30% to 70% of what she consumes is a good-quality formulated diet. I feed my own Greys the Harrison's High Potency pellet, since this has been formulated with their nutritional needs in mind. The protein content in this

pellet is 18% and the fat content is 15%. If you feed a different pelleted diet, with lower protein and fat content, you can supplement with other foods to raise the levels slightly. To supplement protein, you can offer a one-inch square piece of scrambled egg or well-cooked chicken or fish a couple of times a week. The fat content can be elevated by providing a few nuts as training treats. Too much protein or fat can be a problem also, however, so supplementation should be done in moderation. In addition, she should have raw vegetables and fruits, especially vegetables. If you would like more information on diet, you can read my articles "Feeding the Companion Parrot" and "Grey Matters" a two-part article specifically about African Greys. Both are posted at <http://www.parrothouse.com/pamelaclark>.

In regards to your behaviour concerns, I can state absolutely that there is no truth to the myth that parrots go through any period called the "Terrible Twos." Older parrots can be less compliant than young birds, but this does not



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Provide your bird with a wide variety of interesting toys and foraging opportunities and plenty of praise for interacting with them.



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have to be the case. Generally speaking, the best way to avoid problems with a parrot as she grows into adulthood are to:

- 1 Avoid allowing the parrot to form a pair bond with you,
- 2 Make sure that all her needs (physical, social, mental) are met, and
- 3 Provide clear communication about what you want her to do followed by plenty of positive reinforcement for complying with your requests.

Regarding #1: The goal with a young parrot must be to teach her to play independently and to keep herself busy. While it is very comforting to have a parrot on your shoulder, this is to be avoided for two important reasons. First, it will lead to the development of a pair bond with you. Once such a pair bond has formed, she will reject other people and will seek to be with you more and more, gradually losing her independent play skills. Second, while she is on your shoulder, she is not learning anything else. She is only learning to be dependent. Thus, it is important to encourage her to enjoy a variety of perching sites and to interact with toys and foraging opportunities in those locations. She should not be perched on your shoulder or lap for any longer than 5 minutes once or twice a day.

Regarding #2: One pitfall in keeping parrots is the tendency to focus only on their social needs. Social relationships are only one of her many needs. Others include regular bathing, excellent nutrition, learning opportunities, adequate rest, annual veterinary visits (if you have access to an avian vet), fresh air and sunshine, foraging opportunities, exercise, the ability to be out of her cage for at least 3 to 4 hours a day and to move around to different perches throughout the day, and a sense of safety and security. Thus, as

you guide her toward adulthood, you will need to make sure that all of these needs are met.

You may have to teach your bird some of these important living skills. For example, if she does not yet enjoy bathing, you will need to teach her that bathing can be a pleasant experience. If she does not keep herself busy, you will need to introduce a wide variety of interesting toys and foraging opportunities and then provide her with plenty of praise for interacting with them. If there is something in the environment that scares her, it should be eliminated if possible.

One of the most important things you can do for your bird is to make sure that she has plenty of learning opportunities. I recommend Barbara Heidenreich's training DVDs (www.parrots.org). Training a few simple behaviours, such as targeting and turning around on cue, is a wonderful way to provide enrichment to a companion parrot while satisfying their need to learn new things.

Regarding #3: There is no room in a relationship between a human and a parrot for concepts such as control or dominance. Embracing such concepts will lead to interactions in which you choose to use coercion and other behaviour approaches that will result in a lack of trust in her towards you. The best way to keep her as sweet as she is now is to learn how behaviour works and then to guide her behaviour using positive reinforcement.

The truth is that all creatures behave in order to get what they want. A human will not continue to work at a difficult job unless she receives a pay check. A dog will not come when called unless he anticipates that good things will happen when he does. A parrot will not continue to step-up if

there is not some "pay check" present in the experience for her.

Many parrots develop problem behaviours simply because the owner reacts when the behaviour is performed, and this social attention can be a powerful reinforcer. I recommend that you get into the habit of asking yourself continually, "What am I teaching her right now?" If she makes a noise that you don't enjoy, you must ignore it completely. If she talks, and this is something you want her to do more frequently, you should respond immediately with a "Good girl!" and a small food treat.

The best way to maintain compliance in a parrot is to make sure that you reward all desirable behaviours, especially all "cued" behaviours. This means that every time she steps onto your hand when you ask her to, she immediately receives some reward that she finds of value. This might be a food treat, such as a small piece of walnut or a sunflower seed. It could also be a head scratch or a small foot toy. Watch her carefully to figure out what she likes the best and then use that. Try also to have a variety of rewards, so that she does not get bored with the same one. Stepping off of your hand should also receive a reward, and every time she goes back into her cage, she should get a highly valued treat. Every time you ask her to do something, she should receive some form of reinforcement.

Following these guidelines will produce a happy, healthy, well-rounded, and compliant parrot. Moreover, she will choose happily to cooperate with you and you will never have to worry about maintaining "control." Thanks for such a wonderful opportunity to discuss problem prevention!

