



**PARROT KINDERGARTEN**  
STOP GUESSING, START TALKING!

## WHY DO BIRDS BITE?

Cassie Malina, CPBT-KA, CPBC

So often we hear that birds are “wild animals” – and yet, they’re in our own homes... how can they be wild? Unlike dogs and cats who have been bred and domesticated for thousands of years to create calmer temperaments, parrots are only a few generations removed from forests and savannahs.

Their behavior – and their bites – can be so perplexing!

Let’s explore more about why birds bite.

### **Play and Exploration**

Parrots explore their world with their tongues and beaks. This can include exploring our fingers, arms, and other body parts. It is up to us to communicate to our parrots, as their parents and flock mates would in the wild, what amount of beak pressure is acceptable.

### ***What can I do?***

Remaining clear and consistent in the boundaries we set in regard to what we allow our parrots to chew on and to what extent will help teach parrots what level of beak exploration is appropriate. It is important to consistently interrupt exploration that can lead to biting and simultaneously redirect our bird’s exploration to more appropriate items.

### **To Say NO**

Birds learn to bite to put more space between them and us. When we ask our bird to do something, like step up onto our hand, and our bird expresses its desire through its body

language to decline the invitation, if we do not notice, ignore, or misread our bird's communication through its body language that it does not want to participate in our request, our bird might escalate its communication of "no thank you" and lunge at or bite us.

When we retreat, our bird's desire to say "no thank you" and put more space between them and us has been fulfilled. Our bird can learn to bite more in the future as the most successful way for its "no thank you" to be heard and respected.

### ***What can I do?***

We can help our birds choose to say "yes". Learn how to set up the environment so your bird wants to say "Yes!". We can build relationships with our birds based on trust and positive experiences and kind, honest two-way communication. We can turn demands into requests, respect our bird's right to say "no thank you", and enhance our conversations with our birds.

## **Fear Aggression**

All animals have a 'fight or flight' response. In most cases, most animals only choose 'fight' when 'flight' is not an option. If our birds feel that escape from an uncomfortable situation is not possible, they may choose 'fight' and bite us. If that bite results in positive outcomes from the bird's perspective, biting behavior may increase in the future.

### ***What can I do?***

We can make changes to the environment and how we interact with our birds to alleviate their fears and build trust and resiliency to overcome life's challenges. Trust and resiliency can be built through repetition of positive experiences.

Turn fear into anticipation, reluctance into confidence, distrust (wariness) into trust. Become the person our birds look forward to seeing and spending time with rather than a person to be feared and escaped.

## **Frustration-Induced Aggression**

Sometimes, when our birds don't understand what we are requesting of them or when we don't understand what our birds are requesting of us, our birds may become frustrated, and that frustration can escalate to the point of them becoming aggressive and biting us. If that aggression leads to a desired result from the bird's perspective, the bird may learn to bite more in the future.

When we are training or interacting with our birds and there is a lack of information or misunderstanding that is not quickly understood and resolved, sometimes our birds may become frustrated and aggressive. If that aggression leads to a desired result from the bird's perspective, the bird may learn to bite when frustrated.

### ***What can I do?***

All animals are built to behave. When we develop a plan to train and reinforce our bird's desirable behaviors, we can teach them what TO do to earn reinforcers. When we find ourselves wishing our birds would 'stop' doing a particular behavior, we can choose to train a functional desirable behavior to replace the undesirable behavior. Using a high rate of positive reinforcement to train desirable behaviors and being clear and consistent in our communication with our birds can help alleviate frustration and associated aggression.

Being in the moment and present when we are interacting with our birds, taking the time to watch, listen, and learn to read and interpret our birds' body language, will also go a long way in clearing up our communications and alleviating frustration.

### **Territorial Aggression**

Wild parrots are monogamous. One rarely sees a single parrot in the wild. They are most often seen in pairs and small family groups. Even a seemingly large 'flock' of parrots is made up not of individuals clumped together but individual pairs of birds.

When an intruder comes into the territory of a wild parrot, that parrot will chase the intruder out with its body language and voice. Imagine a pair of birds sitting in a tree when an intruder flies up and lands in their tree. Can you imagine that pair lunging at the intruder? Can you see the intruder leave the territory? Can you imagine that, if the next day, the intruder returned, the pair might scream and fly at the intruder to chase it out of their territory?

In our homes, our parrots often bond with one family member. We may see our parrots show body language indicating that they favor one family member over another. In some cases, the least favored family member(s) may be perceived as intruders by the parrot and the parrot may repeatedly attempt to chase those intruders out of the territory the bird shares with its mate (preferred family member). If those chases are successful from the bird's perspective, if even temporarily, the bird may learn to chase and bite more in the future.

### ***What can I do?***

We can make changes to the environment and how family members interact with our birds to decrease the likelihood our birds will chase and become aggressive with perceived intruders. We can work to create and nurture trusting relationships built on repetition of positive experiences and turn intruders into flock mates. We can further help intruders become flock mates when we, as the preferred and chosen flock mate, work to become more neutral and less preferred by our birds.

Parrots may also show aggression when we attempt to change out their food and water dishes. Is this aggression due to us intruding on their small territory inside their enclosure? Is this aggression due to our parrots perceiving that we are taking away a resource that has value to them? Do we startle our parrots when we change out their bowls?

We may not know why our parrots become aggressive during these times. What we do know is that the aggressive behavior is repeated. If it is repeated, the consequence of doing this

behavior is valuable and desirable for the bird. If we can identify the function of the behavior for the bird, we can develop a plan to modify the behavior and replace it with a more desirable, less aggressive behavior, such as stationing on a perch away from the food bowls.

## **Learned Aggression**

When a parrot bites us and the consequence, from the parrot's perspective, is favorable, parrots may learn to bite more in the future.

When our parrot gives us a nibble on our arm while we are eating lunch and we choose to stop the nibbling by giving our parrot a bite of our lunch, we have just increased the likelihood our parrot will nibble on our arm while we are eating lunch in the future. Every time we deliver a treat to our parrots, we are telling them, "Yes! Do that behavior again!".

When we ask our parrots to step up to be moved from one location to another and they nibble on us rather than step up, if we remove our hand from their personal space, even temporarily to get a stick to step the bird up onto, the consequence of us removing our hand and leaving them at their current location can be valuable enough to the parrot to choose to bite us more in the future when we attempt to ask them to step up.\*

### ***What can I do?***

Animals are forever learners. The past does not equal the present. Today is the first day of the rest of our lives. We can start today to build a more desirable behavioral repertoire in our birds. By identifying what consequences are maintaining behaviors and what aspects of the bird's environment make these undesirable behaviors more likely, we can then develop a plan to alter the environment and/or the consequences of displaying this behavior and develop a plan to train an alternate desirable behavior to replace the undesirable behavior and effect positive behavior change.

**ABC's of behavior...** Cassie will show you how to use the ABC's of behavior to take a deeper dive into your parrot behavior conundrums.

\*Steve Martin, Biting, It's Not For The Birds. Published in PsittaScene Magazine. Publication of the World Parrot Trust, April 2002.

**If you try some of these ideas and you're still struggling with biting or aggression, please [reach out to us](#)! Cassie can help set you AND your bird up for successful experiences!**



## Learn More about Your Behavior Teacher Cassie!

*Cassie Malina has been training people and animals professionally worldwide for over 20 years. After graduating with High Distinction from the Pennsylvania State University, Cassie joined the animal training team at Natural Encounters, Inc. During her many years with NEI, she produced and performed in free flight bird shows across the country. She performed in free flight bird shows at Disney's Animal Kingdom since the park's inception through April 2020. She also instructed on the art and science of animal training in numerous workshops, seminars, lectures, webinars and presentations across the country. As part of the NEI team, Cassie consulted on animal programs across the US and abroad. Cassie has been coaching animal caregivers since 2004. She has maintained her CPBC certification from the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) since 2015 and her CPBT-KA certification from the International Avian Trainers Certification Board (IATCB) since 2013, and she completed Dr. Susan Friedman, Ph.D.'s Living and Learning Course. Cassie has been an active member of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE) since 1998 and has been an Executive Board Member of the IAATE since 2004. In 2020, the IAATE presented Cassie with a Lifetime Achievement Award.*

*Cassie provides free behavior workshops each month for our Parrot Kindergarten members, and you can also access her throughout the month for behavior help with your flock family.*

*(PK members receive 50% discount for behavior sessions.)*