

Weaning - The Psychological Dangers

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After hand feeding and fledging, the next stage in a parrot's life is the weaning stage, and this one is not only critical but it is also very dangerous. I will try valiantly not to rant and rave as much in this article as I did in "The Dangers Of Hand Feeding Baby Parrots...and WHY it is encouraged."

No promises, though.

In the above-mentioned article, I covered the greatest physical dangers of hand feeding -- starvation, aspiration pneumonia, crop burns, bacterial and fungal infections. When it comes to the weaning period, a new danger is added to the already long list. This is a non-physical danger, but one that can do serious harm to a parrot's future pet potential. This is the psychological damage that can inadvertently be caused during the weaning process.

HORRIBLE Advice

I have repeatedly heard of incidents where pet store personnel and/or breeders gave the following advice: "If a chick keeps begging when The Books [italics mine] say it is old enough to be weaned, ignore it. When it gets hungry enough, it will learn to eat on its own." This is called "force weaning,." Please, DO NOT FOLLOW THIS KIND OF ADVICE. Is that clear enough?

This advice should not be followed for a variety of reasons.

First, it is important to understand that individual animals do things at their own speeds. For example, children learn to walk when they are ready, not when The Books say they're supposed to. The Books deal with averages, not individuals.

Second, unless the chick has been thoroughly vetted by an AVIAN veterinarian, you don't know if it is healthy. We have learned that chicks with a medical problem need hand feeding much longer than healthy ones.

By the way, YOU should take your new chick to the vet, even if the store or breeder has already done that. Take copies of the bird's records if you are going to a different vet. You need to establish a good relationship with your avian vet, and learn what avian medicine can teach you regarding the care of your new bird.

Perils of Force Weaning

If you force-wean your parrot chick, you could set it up for permanent behavior problems later on. Force weaning entails discontinuing hand feeding when the chick is still begging for it, based on the belief that hunger will force the baby to start eating on its own -- hence the name. Force weaning is the method of choice for people who find hand feeding inconvenient - for whatever reason.

However, the inconvenience of hand feeding should not be considered more important than what is psychologically best for the parrot chick. To be blunt, if someone does not have the time or inclination to wean a bird properly, then the bird should be raised by someone who does. The best idea is to buy ONLY from a highly reputable pet store or aviculturist, and not bring a baby home until it is already fully weaned. As they say, let the experts do it.

Incredible Insecurities Later

Buppies that are force weaned often display massive insecurities later on in their development. These insecurities generally really blossom in the age range of 8-18 months, as parrots begin to develop more independence. Force-weaned birds often become extremely high-strung and prone to stress, and rigid in their eating habits. The development of serious phobic behaviors is typical of force-weaned African greys. Cockatoos who are force-weaned often become chronic whiners, driving their owners crazy with the sound. The large macaws, who are probably not truly "food independent" in the wild until they are over a year old, are often the victims of force weaning. After all, most people don't really want the responsibility of months and months of hand feeding. When macaws are force weaned, they generally get into patterns of obsessive food begging, often with repetitive wing-flicking and "gronking" (typical macaw begging sound) well into adulthood. These aberrant behaviors make sense when one realizes that these force-weaned birds were probably in terror of starvation during a critical period of their development.

Viable Alternative

Suffice it to say that birds grow into better eaters and more secure, stable pets if they are not starved into feeding themselves. Generally speaking, buppies should be hand fed until they start weaning themselves by walking away from the food syringe. I have talked to many aviculturists who have made the same comment, and they don't quite understand why -- it seems that the more well-fed baby parrots are, the more interest they show in the bowls of food in their cages. And the more interest they show in eating on their own, the sooner they will wean themselves naturally -- without the terrors and insecurities of babies that thought they were going to starve.