



Social & Intellectual Needs of Parrots

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The work of [Dr. Irene Pepperberg](#) with African grey parrots has taught us that most exotic birds have relatively high intelligence levels, often falling into the same range of a 5-year old human child. Knowing this, it goes without saying that parrots have very specific and serious [social and intellectual needs](#). These needs can be difficult to meet in captivity, but it is very important that you attempt to learn as much as you can about your bird's needs and do your best to meet them.

Birds are sociable creatures!

Parrots have very intense social bonds in the wild. They are flock animals; they survive by staying with the flock. A bird who becomes lost or abandoned will soon be another animal's meal. Most birds which live in flocks (as most parrots do) and feed communally, tend to pair for life. In captivity, if the bird is kept alone or is bonded primarily to their caregiver (you!), that can present all sorts of problems. You have become this bird's mate, *not her parent*, and the bird expects a lot out of her mate! She expects you to provide her with love and attention every day. Parrots that become bonded to people often suffer when the favored human has to leave for work, go on vacation, or just needs a break. If you do keep your bird singly, please consider [adopting a friend](#). Until that time, be sure to spend time focusing on your bird every day for at least a few hours.

Ideally birds should not be kept singly. Their social needs should be met by another bird. Birds can provide each other with the best source of companionship, because it is instinctual to them and it is constant. [Different species](#) may have different social needs. Cockatoos are notorious for needing intense social interaction, while Ringnecks may be a bit more independent. If you keep a parrot who is bonded to humans in a cage all day, you are setting yourself and your bird up for major problems. Birds who do not get their intense social needs met often develop [behavioral problems](#) such as excessive screaming, feather destruction, and other problematic behaviors that can be difficult to reverse.

Parrots need to fly!

Cages are just that: cages. [An aviary](#) is best, not a cage. If you must cage your birds, give them as much time out as possible -- and start building your aviary! See the [housing page](#) for more information. Allow your bird a safe place to [fly](#). Parrots were designed to fly, and some people feel that it is the inability to fly in captivity that causes all kind of problems such as excessive screaming and feather/body destructive behaviors. A bird's respiratory system is only working properly when she's allowed to fly. If you are planning on adopting a parrot, you should plan on building an aviary at some point to allow your parrot a safe place to fly around.

There is a huge debate in the bird world regarding flying. And there are valid points on each side of the argument. Personally, I'm in favor of flying and my three birds do not have their wing feathers clipped unless it's necessary for their safety. Allowing birds to have full use of their wing feathers is a huge responsibility. You need to make sure your bird will be safe when he's out of his cage. A safe room would be one in which there are no doors to the outside. An interior bedroom would be better. Windows should always have screens in them and should preferably have a shade covering them so birds do not fly into them. Turn off ceiling fans. You should not allow other pets around your bird while he's out of his cage. Some birds who have been clipped may never have learned to fly, so once her wing feathers start growing back in, you will

need to watch her carefully when she tries to fly. She might appear out of control, fly into a wall, mirror, or window, etc. Be sure it's bright enough in the room for her to see properly, and make sure it's a room she's familiar with. A smaller room, such as a bathroom, might be better with clumsy, inexperienced fliers. Just make sure the toilet lid is down and there is no standing water anywhere.

Birds who are allowed to fly may indeed seem more self-assured. They know that they can now get to where they want to go without relying on you, and they know they can get away from danger on their own. They are self-directed.

Clipped birds also face some dangers. Even with their wing feathers fully clipped, some birds can still fly if they get outdoors, especially little Cockatiels. Don't let clipping provide you with a false sense of security. Clipped birds tend to roam around on the floor, where they can be stepped on, crushed behind a door, or picked up by the cat or dog. But, clipping can also help keep your bird safe if he is constantly going places he shouldn't go or if you live somewhere where he could get outdoors easily. You need to decide what's best for your own bird.

Parrots are smart!

In the wild, parrots spend most of their days foraging for food. They chew wood, dig food out of hard to reach places, preen themselves and each other, and fly miles and miles every single day. In our homes, they are much more sedentary. We have to make up for the lack of activity by providing other outlets for their energy. How can you do this? Here are just a few of the things you should do for your parrot to help enrich her environment:

Provide LOTS of [toys](#). Parrots need all kinds of toys; chewing toys, puzzle toys, foot toys, food toys, etc. Toys can be store-bought or home-made. They can be made of food, wood, leather, chains, plastic, etc. Your bird should have a few toys in his cage daily, and these toys should be rotated with other toys on a weekly basis to keep him from getting bored. Store-bought toys can cost a lot -- sometimes well over \$20 just for one toy that your bird will destroy in a matter of hours! Home-made toys, as long as you're using safe materials, are often much cheaper and as fun as the more expensive toys. You can use untreated blocks of wood, strips of fabric, plastic beads, etc.

[Bathe your bird](#). Besides the obvious benefit to your bird's skin and feathers, bathing provides a wonderful way to use energy. You can bathe your bird in the shower, in a sink, in a shallow dish, or with a spray bottle. Never use water as punishment. In fact, never use ANY punishment (not only is it cruel, but parrots do not understand it anyway). Some birds react to a shower as if you're throwing acid at them! Some birds who may have been abused may also have a phobic reaction to water. Go slowly with these birds, let them progress at their own rate, and never force them to bathe. Some birds bathe in their water dishes when you're not looking, so be sure to change the water at least daily. It may take years of offering a shower to your bird, but eventually, she'll probably come around.

Allow plenty of out of cage time. Your bird needs to be out of his cage, if you feel he must have one. He needs to have other places besides his cage to go. You will need to purchase other stands and playgyms or trees for your bird to play on. Outfit these stands with plenty of toys, and your bird will thank you for it.

Your bird's social and intellectual needs are very real and very instinctual. You need to meet these needs. Please refer to the [Links page](#) for more information.