

## When One Parrot Attacks Another

By Lisa Desatnik



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For many years, 18 to be exact, my birds always had free access to their environment. Their cage doors were open whenever I was home. For the most part they stayed on their own cages either napping or keeping busy with things I'd given them. Sometimes Barnaby my African grey parrot would fly onto his play-cage in the other room, which was fine with me. It was a win-win for all of us.

About a year and a half ago, I went upstairs to hear 'Mommy here!' coming from down the hall. I initially thought it was just another day, until I saw Dreyfuss, my pionus, atop Barnaby's cage. Dreyfuss had chased Barnaby off of his cage. That one bad experience set some serious problems in motion.

Just the sight of Dreyfuss transformed Barnaby, my gentle teddy bear, into pure

rage. His aggressive behavior was not directed towards me, only towards Dreyfuss. Barnaby flew at her like a hawk would fly after prey. I've never seen him behave like that. That day I kept both birds separated, and then I made a bad decision. Barnaby really wanted to go back into his room and I thought I could allow him open cage time if Dreyfuss was in her cage with the door closed. Dreyfuss was climbing the bars of her cage and in a split second Barnaby dove in, tearing Dreyfuss's toe open.

OK, there was no more room for bad decisions. I had to come up with a game plan fast. I knew I had to set my birds up for success. My short term goal had to be preventing any situations that would create opportunities for Barnaby's to fly at and attack Dreyfuss. Every moment of every day that passed without Barnaby flying at Dreyfuss I considered a victory.

Lucky for me, I studied (and continue to study) the science of behavior and positive reinforcement strategies with Dr. Susan Friedman and trainers like Barbara Heidenreich. That knowledge proved valuable.

Applied behavior analysis is a systematic approach to solving behavior problems by changing the environment in which the behavior occurs. It involves looking at the very specific behavior (such as a bird biting) and the related environmental context that signals and reinforces it. We ask "What happened immediately prior to the behavior to set the whole ball rolling (antecedent)?" And "What happened immediately after the behavior to reinforce it (consequence)?"

In this case the antecedents that predicted Barnaby's flying behavior included Dreyfuss being outside of her cage – whether sitting on her door, on top of her cage, or on my hand when Barnaby was within close proximity of less than six feet apart. I also observed changes in Barnaby's body language. Barnaby's feathers would stand erect, his body became taught, and his eyes pinned, and he was transfixed on Dreyfuss.

In behavior analysis ABC's can be used to analyze a behavior problem. The A stands for antecedent, the B is the behavior in question and the C stands for the consequences that influence the behavior. The ABC formula for this situation included the following: (Background information: Birds are within six or seven feet from each other and usually in their own room)

1. Antecedent: Dreyfuss is outside of her cage.
2. Behavior: Barnaby's feathers stand erect, his body becomes taught and his eyes pin while being transfixed on Dreyfuss.
3. Consequence: Dreyfuss stays where she is.
4. Antecedent: Dreyfuss stays where she is.
5. Behavior: Barnaby flies at her.
6. Consequence: Dreyfuss gets knocked to the ground, injured or fights back.

In 2 Barnaby clearly exhibited a lesser degree of aggressive body language that did not achieve a desired consequence. This lack of response caused him to escalate his aggressive behavior and fly towards Dreyfuss and attack. The key to success for me was to interrupt that chain. I had to work to reduce or prevent circumstances as much as possible that would cause Barnaby to

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exhibit aggressive body language. If Barnaby did show any of aggressive body language, I needed to respond to those signals BEFORE his aggressive behavior escalated. The key to all of this was for me to be consistently and extremely aware at ALL times of Barnaby's body language.

In the beginning when just the sight of Dreyfuss would set things in motion, I kept the two birds either in their cages or as far apart as they needed to be in order for Barnaby to be relaxed. And I never missed an opportunity to reinforce calm behavior with attention and/or food.

Slowly I was able to carry Barnaby closer to Dreyfuss. I was careful to go at a pace that ensured calm body language from Barnaby. As I walked with him on my arm, I continued to divert his attention with generous amounts of attention. The second that I saw any sign of tensing up in his body, that was my cue to back up and start again.

Over time Barnaby was no longer fixating on Dreyfuss and showed calm body language while in the same room as Dreyfuss in another area of the house. It was time to start working with them in their own room where the flying behavior usually occurred. Always in prevention mode, I let Barnaby out of his cage first and then gave him a few seeds before taking a step toward Dreyfuss' door. I never took my eyes off Barnaby. If I noticed even one of those precursor behaviors just starting, I backed away from Dreyfuss' cage. Slowly we got to where I opened her door and got her out. I held her at arm's length while giving Barnaby more attention. Eventually Barnaby would step up on

my other arm while I was holding Dreyfuss. At this stage I ignored her while talking to Barnaby.

My strategy was successful. Overtime Barnaby started exhibiting calm body language when I let Dreyfuss out of her cage or picked her up.

I still will not take a chance and leave them unattended in their own room when they are out of their cages. However they are very calm around each other while I am there. I can hold them at the same time without problems. I can also leave them unattended for periods of time when they are in another room of the house. I'm not sure if there will ever come a day when I can leave their cage doors open in their own room for hours at a time again, but it sure is nice having peace again in our house.



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