

# Bird and Exotics Vet

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Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St, Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.

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*My 10 year-old son received a Cockatiel this Christmas as we felt he was old enough for the responsibility of a small pet. Harry the Cockatiel is hand-reared and under a year old. He has some unusual behaviours which we're unsure of.*

*The first is that he hisses sometimes and doesn't want to be handled by anyone other than our son. Our youngest child—our little 7 year-old daughter—is not allowed to handle Harry but Harry hisses every time she comes near his cage. My husband and me feel that we should be handling Harry also but he looks scared or angry when we do, which I think the hissing is about*

*The other thing that Harry does is that he picks at his feet, almost like he's chewing them. We can't see anything on his feet like scabs or anything so we're unsure why he's doing this.*

Thanks,

Pat G.  
Kogarah

It is quite common for young cockatiels to hiss at people and cage guard. It is commonly an avoidance or learnt behaviour in untrained cockatiels who have not learned appropriate socialisation. They do not know how to respond correctly to any people aside from the one closest to them, such as your son. Most of these socialisation issues are reversible with behavioural training.

Advice needs to be sought from an avian veterinarian or bird trainer on the best early training for each particular species and problem. Each year birds

should have their behaviour and training assessed, and this knowledge should be built upon. The plan is to teach birds how to act and live with us in order to stop them growing up to be feather pickers, screamers, cage guarders, biters and chronic egg layers. These problems, apart from emergencies, make up the bulk of avian consultations.

This training is not designed to teach birds tricks but to teach them the rules of socialisation. In the wild many cockatiels live close to their parents and flock in the early period of their lives. During this time their parents and other adult birds teach them how to interact and be part of the flock. They teach them what to eat, how to preen themselves and how to call other members of the flock. Pet cockatiels are often moved away from their parents either prior to, or just after, weaning. Often we give these birds no specific instructions except to eat what we feed them, and to accept and enjoy cuddles and preening from us. The birds are left to decide for themselves what is appropriate behaviour and what isn't. When they try out certain behaviour, such as hissing, we either reward them or reprimand them. This may reinforce the behaviour. These birds learn by trial and error how to act and, if not corrected or steered in the right direction, often learn poor habits.

Birds that live in our houses need to learn how to interact with humans. We can teach birds to adjust better to living with their human flock and be happy living in our environments and with our lifestyles. This may be achieved in a single consultation at an avian veterinarian or bird trainer. It may also

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need several consultations over a period of time to assess how your bird is progressing. If no behavioural training is commenced soon the problems become so entrenched that, in some of these birds, behavioural and hormonal drugs may also be necessary in conjunction with behavioural changes.

As for the feet chewing; this may have many causes from behavioural problems, infections, internal medical problems or even from toxins (such as heavy metals and nicotine). Feet chewing commonly leads to secondary skin infections, so it is important to have this checked by your local avian veterinarian. The veterinarian may wish to try some simple treatments for infection or they may also recommend more involved testing including blood tests, faecal tests and in some cases radiographs to establish the cause of the feet chewing. In occasional cases it may be necessary to employ methods to avoid allowing your cockatiel the ability to chew at its feet. Often, whatever the initial cause, the chewing becomes habitual and your avian veterinarian may suggest some further longer term behavioural training to decrease the feet chewing.



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