

Children and Cockatiels

By Sandra Warren

Many parents have asked me if I have a baby cockatiel available for their child's 3rd birthday and to be honest, I just cringe at that thought. The first thought that enters my mind: "Is this family honestly educated and prepared for a pet of any kind?" Let's examine what I'm referring to by looking into what "prepared for a pet means".



Buying a bird, kitten or puppy requires a long time commitment. Birds tend to live a long time too, when given the proper care and diet. So, are you prepared to care for a cockatiel for 20 to 30 years? Have you researched the breed and talked to reputable breeders? Will you be able to adequately supervise young children and teach older children how to handle the bird? Does your family really have time in today's busy and hectic lifestyles to interact and enjoy a pet cockatiel? Have you decided what diet is best and located a place to purchase food? What kind of cage will you need? Does the room placement need to be considered? Does my veterinarian provide care for birds? Is my child actually old enough for a pet, and my favorite question of all; will this bird talk?

Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) are very social little Psittacine (belonging to the parrot family) birds. They belong to the Cacatuidae or cockatoo family and are native to (originally from) Australia. Cockatiels come in all types of beautiful mutations (variations of the normal color) but the grey with orange cheek spots is the nominant (wild color) form. Because they are by nature very social, a baby cockatiel will expect to spend time as part of his new flock (family). Birds are not meant to be decorations - cockatiels need social interaction.

Cockatiels in the wild will feed on grass seeds, fruits, nuts, insects, etc. However, recent research has established that caged birds require a much different diet. A pelleted or extruded diet will provide your bird with all the nutrients needed, but Cockatiels cannot be fed only pellets, or kidney damage could result. It is recommended that pellets be supplemented with seed plus other fruits and vegetables. Does your local pet shop carry pelleted cockatiel mixes or will you have to order this online? This is something you will want to discuss with the breeder of your baby bird. You will



need to find out what food the baby bird was weaned. Where does the breeder purchase this food and what should you expect to pay? Is there a substitute that would be equally nutritious that could be purchased locally if what the bird is used to is not readily available?



Bird cages can be found in pet stores, on ebay, at auctions and even yard sales. Bird cages are not always safe for birds. What should you know before purchasing a cage? Well, to start, bar spacing and length are of great importance. Bars should run horizontally and be no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch apart. The cage should be at least 24" long, and 18" high. It should allow for plenty of room for perches, swings, and hanging toys. The bird should also be able to stretch his wings out occasionally for a good flap. Ideally you should purchase the largest one you have room for. The cage should not be placed near a draft or in the direct sunlight. You will want your bird to feel safe in his new home so place it accordingly. On the floor, in a high traffic area when children, dogs and cats pass by is not the place for your bird. The bird will also require more sleep time so a place where "lights off" can be worked out is best. Do not trust old cages! Many metals are toxic to birds and a cage that was used a long time ago for birds may not necessarily be safe now.

Not all veterinarians provide care to birds. Check with your veterinarian before you have an emergency. Find out where your closest avian veterinarian is located and what he/she recommends for the initial visit. An initial and follow-up routine check-up is recommended. Many breeders will include the fee for the first veterinary exam with the purchase of the bird.

Young children will need constant supervision when handling a bird. Children can be taught to properly hold a bird but will still need supervision and occasional help. I like to teach the baby birds to stay in or on a basket. The basket can be taken from room to room, it's a great "poop" catcher and it allows younger children to interact with, but not necessarily hold the bird. Baby cockatiels have sharp toenails and can easily scratch children. Some young children can be frightened by the scratch or nibble of a bird. Baby birds can feel safe in or on a basket and it can be used as a great training tool.



Older children will likely be the caretaker of the bird. Are you prepared to supervise and instruct the care-taking? Is your child interested enough in a bird to learn all about the species, care and training of the bird? Is this child likely to lose interest in the bird? If so, are you likely

to lose interest in the bird too? What will happen to the bird? Remember that cockatiels need a lot of social interaction.

Yes! Cockatiels can mimic whistles and short phrases. The cocks (males) are the best talkers but sometimes a hen (female) will also whistle and talk a bit. They learn by repetition and interaction.

Owning a pet cockatiel can be a very rewarding and educational experience for the whole family. Do your homework first. Answer the questions honestly. Are you and your children ready for the long term commitment? Do you have a nice cage and safe toys? Have you talked to your veterinarian? Do you have a good source for bird food? And finally, are you ready for an unbelievably fulfilling and rewarding experience of becoming a bird owner? If you are then go for it. In addition, join in with other cockatiel or bird lovers in a local club or national one. You can network with cockatiel enthusiasts locally and all across this country. Clubs will always welcome you.

