

Safe Toys for Your Parrot

By Sharon St. Joan

By nature, parrots are active, playful and curious. In the wild, they spend hours foraging, bathing, preening, climbing and socializing with other birds. Creating an environment that will fulfill some of their natural desires to fly, forage, and socialize is necessary to keep parrots mentally content and physically fit in captivity.

In addition to providing a minimum of three hours of daily socialization and out-of-cage time, provide your birds with a variety of bird-safe toys and enrichment activities that will simulate the kinds of experiences they would have in their natural habitats.

Because parrots are highly intelligent, they become bored easily and need variety. So, it's a good idea to rotate their toys – many people change their parrot's toys once a week. However, as with all new things, it is possible for a bird to react to a new toy with fear. If this happens, move the new toy to a lower height and far enough away so that the bird is no longer fearful. You can move it closer as the bird becomes used to it.

The fact that a toy is manufactured and sold as a parrot toy does not guarantee its safety. Many of the toys commonly sold for parrots can be dangerous; they can cause serious accidents, the most common of which are catching a toe or a beak in the toy.

You should learn more about safe toys by consulting a variety of sources, and by paying close attention, over time, to how parrot toys are constructed. One way to avoid potential problems and/or to prevent accidents is to first introduce your bird to new toys outside her cage. You can then observe how your bird reacts and plays before leaving her unattended with new toys.

Although it is possible to make simple, safe, homemade toys, it's not a good idea until you have a clear understanding of what is safe and what isn't. For most of us, it's better to stick to using toys that have been manufactured specifically for birds.

How do I know if the toy attachment is safe?

When looking at a toy, first look at the attachment that will hold the toy to the cage. The safest kind of attachments are shaped like a double U, commonly referred to as a C-hook. It consists of a metal U on the bottom joined to a metal U on the top, and one side can be screwed open or closed. These attachments come in different sizes and are often sold separately, so that you may be able to replace an unsafe attachment with a safe double-U attachment. Similar attachments that are pear-shaped are also generally safe.

Avoid using long cords or chains that birds can become entangled in, split-ring or dog-clip type attachments that birds can get their beaks stuck in, and attachments that contain toxic metals or materials.



How do I know if the toy itself is safe?

Most importantly, a toy must be made especially for the size parrot that you have. A cockatiel toy is always unsafe for a larger parrot. Parrot toys are generally labeled for small, medium or large parrots.

There's no foolproof way to be sure a toy is safe – but experience helps, so ask advice from a knowledgeable person. When you first put a new toy in your parrot's cage, watch her with it for a few minutes. If anything seems to momentarily catch a toenail or a beak, remove the toy immediately and do not use it.

As mentioned above, you should select only toys that are specifically manufactured for birds. Examine toys closely to make sure there are no spaces where your bird's toes, feet or beak can get caught. Toys shouldn't have sharp points, cracks, splinters, or splinters. Don't use a toy with too many parts (which could become twisted or tangled), with tiny parts that could be pulled off, or with metal chains with tiny gaps in the links. If the toy just looks complicated, flimsy or badly made, don't use it.

Always check that materials are non-toxic and bird-safe. A few good choices are:

- Wood: Birds love to chew wood and are particularly attracted to colors. However, make sure that the wood is untreated or that the dyes used are non-toxic.
- Acrylic: Choose acrylic toys that are sturdy and well-made.

Other good choices are toys made with vegetable-tanned leather *only*, 100% cotton and/or sisal, and other bird-safe materials that are specifically manufactured for birds.

Cowbell-style bells and jingle bells are toys to avoid. Jingle bells are never a safe choice because the slits in them are shaped so that round openings narrow into smaller slits, which can easily trap a toe or a beak if it slides along the slit. Make sure other toys don't have a similar configuration of a large opening narrowing into a smaller one.

Be careful with the placement of toys. Your bird also needs room to perch, and a way to get from perch to perch. Toys are meant to be fun and entertaining for your bird. Avoid placing so many toys in your bird's cage that it results in overcrowding and prevents your bird from moving about freely.

Remember, toys are not just a luxury for your bird; they are essential to your bird's mental and physical well-being. So, it's well worth the effort to take the time to learn about toys and choose those that are safe. Nothing is more delightful than watching a happy bird playing with a toy that he loves!

For more information on parrots and parrot care, visit the Avian Welfare Coalition website at www.avianwelfare.org.

Sharon St. Joan established Feathered Friends at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary and has cared for birds and wildlife for over 15 years. She now devotes her time to writing about birds and wildlife-related issues.