

Ever since my daughters could speak, they've pulled the classic please-can-we-get-a-puppy-or-kitten routine, which they occasionally downgraded to gerbil-or-hamster. Unfortunately my respiratory system's reaction to animal hair answered those questions for the entire family.

So there they were, petless and petulant, when we agreed to babysit a friend's parakeet. Frieda packed a surprising amount of pet quality into her 30-odd grams. She chirped at the girls as if she were speaking to them, sailed around the room in graceful figure eights, landing gently on Lucy's and Olivia's heads (causing shrieks of delight), and seemed genuinely eager to interact with us—who isn't a sucker for that? "Please can we get a bird?" became the new refrain. I caved, thanks to Frieda. »

## The Tweet Life

Cockatiels are affectionate, playful, and curious—almost like a feathered puppy. (Almost.)

BY CHRISTINA FRANK



#### Note from the editors:

There are a lot of folks who feel that birds and small children are not a good combination—the latter's energy and lack of control are stressful and potentially dangerous for the former. Because of this risk, birds are not well suited for kids under 5. However, as with most of parenting, it's all about knowing your kid: A quiet or gentle child may be fine with a bird, a rambunctious one maybe not so much.

## Bird Brains

Some research revealed our best bet would be a cockatiel. Tiels are calmer and less nippy than parakeets, obvious pluses in a house with kids. Larger parrots are high maintenance, and, while little birds such as finches and canaries are pretty, they don't bond with their humans like hookbills do.

The key to getting a kid-friendly tiel is to buy a baby that's been hand-raised, held and fed by a human shortly after exiting the egg. We went to a birds-only pet store and were instantly charmed by a 9-week-old female cockatiel standing adorably in her food dish, surrounded by her five brothers. "I love her cheeks!" said 5-year-old Lucy, referring to the bright orange patches most tiel varieties sport on their faces. "I love her hairdo," said 10-year-old Olivia, admiring the bird's Mohawk-style crest. We took her home and christened her Hazelnut Coco Birdsworth, Hazel for short.

## Birds of a Feather

Cockatiels are programmed to hang around in flocks, which makes them very sociable characters. Two tiels will happily keep each other company, but you'll have to work harder to get them to bond with you; a single tiel will, by default, turn to you for companionship. Either sex makes for a good pet, but it's nearly impossible to identify a bird's gender when it is young. A bird's private parts are really, really private. (The owner of the store we went to had his tiels DNA-tested, which is how we knew Hazel was a girl, but this isn't common.)

The girls immediately treated Hazel like a new little sister; better, actually. She perches on Lucy's knee through episodes of *Charlie and Lola*. She pokes around on Olivia's desk while she does homework (and beware—this is a pet who really will eat your homework). They invite Hazel to hang with them while they play with ☛

## Tiel Trappings

- **Depending on their color** and whether they were hand-raised, tiels generally cost between \$60 and \$175.
- **Buy the biggest cage** you can afford and accommodate. The minimum size for a cockatiel is 18 x 18 x 24, and runs \$60 to \$100. Put the cage somewhere near the human flock, but where your bird can get 10 to 12 hours of undisturbed sleep, cage covered.
- **Tiels will** not thrive on seed alone. Their daily diet should also include pellets (a.k.a. birdie kibble), grains such as brown rice, and fresh green vegetables; millet spray is a treat.
- **Things poisonous** to tiels include avocado, chocolate, and many house plants. Another warning: Don't use nonstick cookware; when heated on the stovetop or in the oven, it releases a fume that is deadly to tiels. Scary, no? (For a list of other substances toxic to tiels, see the book below or [exoticpetvet.net](http://exoticpetvet.net).)
- **Tiels like** to keep busy, so bring on the toys. Most of them love to chew and shred stuff, and there are many bird toys that will satisfy this urge.
- **Our family** relied heavily on *Cockatiels for Dummies*, by Diane Grindol, for info on caring for Hazel.

When they are content, cockatiels grind their beaks, which sounds like a kid crunching hard candy. Once you realize it means they are happy, you come to love the noise.



Breezy Singers parakeet by Takara

### Practice Run

It's made of plastic but looks, sings, even moves like the real thing. One mom we know loves this song-bird as much as her kids do, saying, "It's better than a real bird." How could she say such a thing? "There's no cage cleanup. And there's an off switch." (\$20, southernagriculture.com)



Polly Pockets, though they have to watch her so she doesn't put a hole in the dolls' rubbery togs with her beak. They feed her popcorn and go crazy over the way she picks up a kernel with her "fingers" and studies it before taking dainty little bites. Hazel also likes to beak-wrestle with elastic hair bands, so the girls have given her their supply. (I had to draw the line at letting them put her crest in a ponytail.)

Playtime happens before and after school every day, as handling cockatiels regularly keeps them affectionate and socialized (birds that never leave the cage become fearful and unfriendly). Hazel is pretty accommodating. She'll happily sit on your shoulder while you vacuum, read, or brush your teeth; we put her on a portable perch when it's more convenient to have her near us than on us. She comes to the girls to have the back of her neck scratched; she gets all warm and snuggly under your chin and falls asleep there. (Unexpectedly endearing is that she smells like corn chips. In a good way.)

Handling Hazel also has forced the girls to rein in their maniacal kid energy and spend some time in the land of the calm. Cockatiels tend to be freaked out by sudden movements and they're relatively delicate pets. Hazel is a good-hearted soul, but even the sweetest cockatiels can bite, and it usually happens because they're frightened. (When afraid, a tiel often makes a snake-like hissing noise; consider it a warning shot.) A tiel bite isn't life threatening, but it hurts, kind of like a flu shot. Lucy's been nipped by Hazel a few times and, while it bruised her feelings, it hasn't scared her off at all.

### Nest-Keeping

The kids do need reminding about the daily tasks of giving Hazel fresh water and

food and changing the papers in her cage. If you've ever wondered whose poop doesn't smell, the answer is a cockatiel's. What it lacks in odor, however, it makes up for in frequency. Every 15 minutes to be exact. Thankfully Hazel's neat little caper-sized turds lift off easily with a piece of paper. We also like a clever product called Poop-Off, just for cleaning up bird droppings. Lucy loves to come running with the spray bottle, superhero style, shouting "Poop-Off to the rescue!"

Discipline isn't a big part of life with birds, but two things are crucial to keeping them in line: wing clipping and the step-up command. Trimming their wing feathers (which is painless, not unlike cutting your fingernails) makes them more dependent on you to get around and less likely to give you attitude (or altitude). They can still fly, but they aren't likely to land on anything much taller than the back of a chair.

The step-up command is the bird-owner's answer to "sit" or "stay." Firmly push your index finger or a perch against the front of your bird's ankles and say "step up!" A few practice sessions are all it takes to make this a habitual response. Hazel's gotten so good at it that she lifts her foot when she sees a human hand. And the girls are good at it too—after all, they rarely get to tell someone else what to do.

With good care, a tiel will stick around for 15 to 20 years, on average. So even when your kids grow up and leave home, your nest won't be empty. ■



Lucy (left), now 6, and Olivia, now 11, think Hazel's fondness for keyboards is a sign that she wants to follow in mom Christina's writerly footsteps.