

The Importance Of Proper Feeding

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By Penny Corbett

I am a novice bird breeder, breeding lovebirds and cockatiels. I pull all of my babies at 10 days of age to hand-feed them so they are very tame. I was told that hand-feeding babies is better for them than having them raised by the parents. The babies are fine, and they are very tame. I noticed that my babies and a friend's babies have larger heads than some of the other chicks we have seen. Can you explain why?

It sounds like your babies may be stunted. Many novice breeders are very anxious to pull babies and hand-feed them. As for hand-fed chicks being better than parent-fed chicks, I do not agree with this. It is my opinion that a good pair of birds can do a better job raising their young than we can. Nature is pretty miraculous if we leave well enough alone, and do not try to "fix" what isn't broken. I have known many people throughout the years I have been involved with birds who honestly believed they could do a better job than the natural parents could. Each of us has our own opinions and beliefs and, as long as they do not pose any harm to our birds, we are entitled to them.

Hand-feeding chicks because there is a problem with the parents rearing them or to make them better pets is a different matter. It should be noted that just because a chick is hand-fed does not necessarily mean it is tame or that it will be a good pet. There are hand-fed chicks that are not tame, and hand-feeding is not a synonym for tame. There are also chicks that have not been hand-fed that are tame and are great pets.

Pitfalls Of Feeding I prefer not to have chicks pulled at 10 days old or sooner by novice breeders, unless they can meet the demands of the proper feeding schedule, and they have someone who can monitor the progress of the chicks growth. Many mistakenly believe that if they pull at 10 days of age they can feed the chicks three times a day, this simply is not true. In fact, too often breeders reduce the number of feedings to three times a day much too early in young chicks' lives. They may well survive, as psittacines are excellent at surviving; flourishing, however, is a different matter.

Unfortunately, not feeding chicks often enough is not an error only made by new breeders. For some reason, there are people feeding babies who decide that when a chick is a certain age, it should be fed a certain amount of times a day or every so often. They completely ignore the fact that the chick may be hungry before the time they have scheduled the feeding. One example would be the general "fact" that all Day-Old babies get fed every two hours when, in fact, some of these chicks are ready to eat way before that two hour feeding time. It is my practice and belief that chicks should be fed when they are ready to be fed, not when the clock or a schedule says it is time to eat. How can an empty baby crying for food not be fed because it has only been an hour and a half since the last feeding, and the feeding schedule is every two hours?

Just because someone has experience feeding one or two species does not mean that they can feed any species, or they are experienced hand-feeders capable of feeding any and all chicks. For example, if a person has had experience feeding blue-and-gold macaws, they should not assume they could raise a hyacinth macaw the same way.

Stunting A protruding backbone, redness in the skin, toothpick wings and feet are very early signs of stunting, a direct result of not being fed enough food. The thin wings and feet result from not having enough fluid in the total body. The protruding backbone is an immediate sign that something is not right. The chick is not getting enough food. Small chicks in an environment that is too hot rapidly dehydrate, resulting in the bright red skin color.

Stunting signs include a large, oversized-looking head, often with eyes that appear to be bulging. Underfed chicks can develop curved-in toes on their feet. They are slow to grow and develop, appearing too "fragile or delicate" and thin.

It is the lack of experience in proper hand-feeding techniques that causes stunting. Inefficient feeding by the parent birds also causes stunting in chicks. Some of the errors in hand-feeding are: • Not feeding enough formula • Overfilling the crop • Feeding poor quality food or a formula that is too thin • Not providing enough feedings in a day (Chicks should be fed as they need to be, not according to a schedule.) • Not weighing chicks daily and keeping weight charts. (Chicks should be weighed first thing in the morning before the first feeding of the day. The crop should be completely empty and an accurate scale should be used.)

Caught early enough, stunting can be turned around, regardless if it is the result of the natural parents or the human

parents. Providing a good quality formula at the correct thickness, the correct amount and following the right feeding schedule for the chick can recoup earlier poor weight gains.

There are far too many stunted pets on the market, which could have been easily avoided. Any time you raise a species you do not have experience with, it is always good practice to ask for help and advice from someone experienced with the species. Get as much information as you can before you begin the task of hand-feeding. This will give you a solid start. Continue to ask for advice and help along the way.

There is a great amount of quality written material on the proper care of neonates, along with a range in weight charts. Good breeders are willing to share their experiences to help. Keep in mind that the time spent helping you takes away from the time they have to tend to their own flock, and don't forget to say thank you for the time and information they have shared with you.

Columnist Penny J. Corbett has been breeding birds for more than 25 years. She has experience showing and judging many species, including color-bred and type canaries, finches, and softbills. She currently breeds mainly hookbills and is one of the Ask the Experts columnists for Bird Talk magazine.