

The Dangers of Hand Feeding Baby Parrots

and WHY it is encouraged

by Liz Wilson

In the 20 years I worked with avian veterinarians, I have seen over and over how easy it is for an inexperienced hand feeder to do serious physical and psychological damage to an un-weaned parrot chick -- indeed, many parrot babies do not survive the human's learning process. From my experience, these helpless babies most frequently die due to one or more of the following causes: starvation, aspiration pneumonia, crop burns, and bacterial and/ or fungal infections.

When new owners phone pet stores and/or breeders to complain their baby parrot is begging incessantly, inexperienced personnel may misinterpret the situation and assume the baby is simply getting spoiled, as opposed to actually being hungry. If so, the advice given often involves simply ignoring the baby. Actual incidents involve people being told to put babies in a back room or out in the garage so the constant begging sounds don't irritate them too much.

Unfortunately, without more information, these well-meaning but uninformed people on BOTH ends of the phone cannot judge if a baby is crying not because it is spoiled but because it is actually starving. Too many times I have seen situations where new buyers have incomplete and/or incorrect instructions detailing feeding frequency and/or volumes of food that are simply too small to maintain the survival (much less growth) of a baby parrot. Whether the store personnel actually goofed or the new owner simply misunderstood, I couldn't say -- either way, the babies suffer terribly. IF they survive, the long term repercussions include both chronic physical problems and some very serious psychological problems that could destroy their future potential as pets.

Pneumonia

Inexperienced hand feeders often don't know how easy it is for a parrot to accidentally inhale formula, which can happen if food is pushed into the baby's mouth either too fast or too slow. Food inhaled into the lungs results in a serious medical condition called aspiration pneumonia, and parrot chicks rarely survive this. Some reputable breeders switch their un-weaned chicks over to spoon feeding before sending them home with a buyer, and they allow the chick to leave their care only after it is down to only one feeding per day. Spoon feeding takes longer than syringe feeding, and can be amazingly messy, but it is definitely safer for the chick, since the possibility of aspiration is virtually nil

Crop Burns

Incredibly common, crop burns are caused by feeding formula that is too hot. This often results from the use of microwaves to heat the baby's food, for microwaves are famous for producing "hot spots". The owner does not realize the damage until days later, when the burn inside the crop fistulates, forming an opening to the outside -- in other words, the crop is burned clear through. This condition will lead to serious bacterial and fungal complications if not dealt with swiftly by a competent avian veterinarian.

Crop burns are easy to prevent, simply by stirring the food thoroughly, then using a candy thermometer to check the temperature prior to feeding.

Bacterial and Fungal Infections

All baby animals, parrot or otherwise, are prone to illness because their immune system isn't fully developed. Because of this tendency, excellent hygiene is critical. All feeding equipment should be sterilized after each use, and formula should NEVER be reheated

The early signs of a parrot baby getting sick can be extremely subtle and are often missed by an inexperienced owner, and babies can die extremely quickly. The moment an experienced hand feeder wonders if there is a problem is the moment the avian vet should be contacted -- a "wait and see" attitude generally results in the death of the bird.

Conclusion

Obviously, the process of hand feeding a baby parrot is an extremely complex matter, with tremendous potential for disaster. The training a novice hand feeder needs can't be covered in a couple of minutes prior to the purchase of an un-weaned chick. So why, you ask, do people want to take on that kind of responsibility? From my own experience, once the possible dangers are explained, people quickly change their minds about wanting to do it, and are delighted to have experienced personnel finish off the process.

So if hand feeding is so potentially dangerous, why is it that so many people are encouraged to take home an un-weaned chick after minimal teaching? Simple, really -- hand feeding is incredibly labor intensive. The sooner a parrot chick is gone, the higher the profit ratio for the store or breeder. So it behooves the seller to convince the buyer that hand feeding is safe and easy.

Does "Let the buyer beware" sound familiar, anyone?

Incidentally, the old wives' tales about parrots only "bonding to the hand feeder" are simply not true. As I have mentioned before, hand fed parrot chicks only appeared in the pet trade about 20 years ago. Humans have kept parrots as pets for thousands of years, and those birds were wild animals who were captured and tamed, NOT babies that were hand fed by humans. Do you actually think that no human ever had a bonded relationship with a parrot prior to 15 years ago?

The subject of bonding is a complex one, and grounds for an entire column in the future. Suffice it to say, you do not need to be the one holding the syringe to have your baby parrot learn to love you -- you need to be the one that nurtures and teaches and protects... and the one the baby learns to trust.

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