

My Co-parenting Experiences with Companion Sun Conures

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There is just enough non-conformist in me to explore aspects of my interactions with my feathered companions that are not in mainstream books—I feel relaxed enough with them and they with me to expand what tradition says should be our relationship. One of these expansions is through co-parenting.



Because of renewed interest (in the U.S.) in “alternative” parenting of baby parrots—that is, other than straight parent-rearing or straight handfeeding from an early age—and because I have such a special relationship with my sun conure companions, Suzie and Solay, I want to share with others my experiences in “flock” raising of their chicks, as well as observations that may be helpful if others are thinking of trying co-parenting.

I admit there is a large degree of self-gratification in being interactive as a “flock” member in rearing a chick, but I also feel, based on my and several other peoples’ experiences, that co-parenting is a valid alternative that can produce not only a bird that is equal in companion quality to a totally handfed bird, but may indeed be superior in emotional and social adjustment. Time and further studies will confirm or deny this.

What is Co-parenting?

“Co-parenting” is a term used to apply to some degree of joint rearing of chicks from hatch to weaning—depending on the situation, the temperament and setup of the parent birds, and the schedule of the person doing the co-parenting. It includes, but may not be limited to, the following three methods:

- (1) Supplementing handfeeding morning and evening, handling/playing with the babies, and leaving in the nest box through weaning;
- (2) Handling/playing with the babies for a daily period of time (usually 5 to 15 minutes) without handfeeding, and leaving in the nest box through weaning (and even beyond); and
- (3) Handfeeding in the morning, handling/playing with in the evening, and pulling from the nest box at or near fledging for handfeeding (and/or co-feeding with parents).

U.C. Davis did a study several years ago on orange-winged Amazon babies, basically using method (2). They had rigged up a way to shut the parents out of the box, so there wouldn’t be a problem with aggression toward chicks or handlers during the interactive chick play times. Follow-up studies on generations-level effects are being conducted. These hope to discern the adult temperament impacts of the co-parented birds themselves (as distinguished from either wild caught or handfed from an early age) as parents. It may be a few years before results are published!

Through the years, I’ve tried various degrees of co-parenting, and I’ve read about others’ experiences with this less-than-common way of rearing baby parrots from hatch to weaning. Personally, method (3) has worked best for me so far to produce companion-quality birds. I co-parented a few cockatiels years ago as well as conures (sun, brown throated, green cheek).



Co-parenting with Companion Suns

Suzie and Solay (S&S) are a 10-year-old companion pair of sun conures in my living room. Both were originally handfed. Solay was pulled from the nest at 5 days old, and Suzie at about 3 weeks old. A small breeder raised Solay, and I got him at 3 months old on one feeding a day. Suzie was raised by a larger breeder, was not well socialized, and I got her at 10 months old (her third home). Solay has always been stable and outgoing, but Suzie had to learn to trust humans (helped through Solay's example). After 3 years of "trying" (infertile eggs) and settling for fostering other conures, S&S finally got it right in 2002 and had 3 babies of their own in one clutch and 2 in the next. I decided to try co-parenting, as they both trust me. Also, I had already done this with a single brown-throated conure fostered to them the previous year. They are tending their second clutch of 2005 as of this writing.

Clutch One January, 2002

I talked with S&S and the babies on a daily basis, reaching in a gently stroking the babies' backs from about one week on. I handled the babies from about 3 weeks, including giving them some formula, with S&S looking on (and getting tastes themselves). I finally put the babies in a brooder when the oldest was just over a month old because Suzie was too nippy when I got them out of the nest box to feed. I got tired of finger punctures, plus I was concerned that she would make the babies skittish or accidentally bite them when she was lunging at me.

It worked well—the babies were calm, friendly, and inquisitive. I let S&S out when I fed the babies, and they "supervised." Solay actually got in the feeding tub with them and "helped" by feeding and by cleaning around their faces after I fed them. Both he and Suzie groomed their fuzz and opening feathers, with Solay doing most of it.

For the first couple of weeks, I'd let S&S out when I fed the babies. They realized quickly that I was feeding and that they didn't have to do it, so they were content to watch (and get a mouthful of warm formula themselves) and then groom the babies once I finished feeding them. Suzie pretty much lost interest in watching and grooming after about a week, and Solay by two weeks.

I actually think Suzie was relieved because she had been so instinctively tied to that nest box and babies. Both of them, however, did continue to accept the babies when all were out playing—that is, they did not consider them territorial intruders as they did other babies.

Regarding wing clipping, when they have learned to fly, maneuver, and land well, and are starting to get TOO independent (not wanting to go back in their cages and going up to high places in the living room), I begin a progressive clip. I cut flight feathers (just below the secondary coverts and watching for blood feathers)—only enough to slow them down (maybe 2 to 4) and keep them from being able to evade as easily. That doesn't really seem to bother them, and it makes my life easier. Also, if they get



spooked, they won't crash into things with such force. Before they go to companion homes, I usually do have 5 feathers clipped on each side so that it will be easier for their new "flock" people to work with them, and so that any startles in a new place will not result in accidental crashing.

Clutch Two: April, 2002

S&S's second clutch of two hatched about 3 months after the first clutch. I took the babies from the nest at almost 7 weeks. Suzie was more comfortable with my handling them, plus I had devised a slide door to block her so I could retrieve them without receiving finger-punctures. These babies had actually fledged into the cage before I pulled them, but were not agile yet in getting around it. Again, I would include S&S when I fed the babies. They stayed engaged with them much longer than with the first clutch, and I can only surmise that's because they had them longer this time.

I found that because they were older, these two babies would not take as much formula at a feeding—their crops were not "stretched" as they would have been had they been handfed from an earlier age, plus they were actually at the stage of development where the crops would have been starting to shrink so that they could properly fledge. Once I'd given them what they would eat, they'd want to fly to S&S's cage (dometop). I'd let S&S out, give them some formula, and they'd feed the babies some more—really a funny sight—all four getting bites of formula. Friends would come over and watch feeding time with S&S and the two babies and me, and said they wouldn't have believed it if they hadn't seen it.

As the babies matured and were eating soft foods well, they ate less formula, and S&S would do a perfunctory beak-grab-pump, but didn't give them very much—like what they'd do when weaning them naturally. These babies actually weaned a bit earlier than the first 3 that I'd pulled younger. They were also maybe a bit more independent than the first 3, but still very sweet and sociable.

Clutches 2003 through 2005

These clutches pretty much followed what I experienced with previous clutches, and 5 to 6 weeks worked well for initial removing from nestbox. Suzie and Solay have become more accustomed and accepting of my "interference" in raising their chicks. In fact, when sun chicks are quite small in the nest and I am feeding other babies, S&S "talk" to me until I give them a few cc's of formula, which they then feed the chicks in the nest—just makes their job a bit easier! Suzie has not, however, been tolerant of my fingers in the nestbox with the babies when she's in there too! When I block the nestbox entrance so I can handle the chicks, she fusses a bit, then proceeds to eat, knowing I will open it and let her back in there.



I have also had opportunities to observe two individuals from previous years' clutches interacting with current year babies, and the nurturing behavior was gratifying to behold.

Conclusions

Most babies from these clutches were independent, self-confident, explorative, and friendly—even to strangers. A couple of the babies were more independent than others, and not quite as friendly to strangers, but those appear to have been individual differences, as would be expected in raising any groups of youngsters. Typically, they would go from their parents to other cages to me, like little social butterfly-birds. They learned quickly who considered them intruders (on their cage), but seemed to “shake it off” and just hang out with their “flock” (their parents and me, as well as other humans who interacted with them).



They were easy-going and not aggressive, though they would mock-defend their cages when others landed on them. They were equally comfortable playing with and mutually preening each other or their parents, and with cuddling with me and most other people.

Looking at these experiences, 5 to 6 weeks seems optimal, depending on the chicks and parents—at least for these suns. From my perspective, the handling/ socializing is all important. I've had other sun babies that I started handfeeding at 10 days old that were no tamer than these babies, and the confidence level and independence of these guys were just enough more for me to notice. Of course, this is a small sampling, and to “prove” it, I'd have to have many more and be able to follow up with them over time. From what I've seen so far, I believe they will on the whole be stable, self-confident, and therefore able to adjust to new situations—but whether better than an early-pulled handfed chick, I don't have enough data to conclude, except that so far, they seem to be less prone to screaming and developing neurotic clingy behavior, which are positive insofar as retaining their homes. If they would be better parents in a breeding situation, I also don't know—but I suspect they would, considering that when I look at S&S's starts in life, it took them until they were 7+ years old to “get it right.”

Regarding breeding, suns are often prolific to the point of 3 or 4 clutches in a year. After their second clutch, I replace S&S's nestbox with an open-fronted sleepbox. This gives them a place to sleep, but it is not dark during the day, and this effectively stops the breeding.

When I put their nestbox up again around Thanksgiving, they will usually go to nestbox within two to three weeks and will hatch the first clutch of babies in January. It's good to be able to plan timing!

My Musings on Behavior

I think that most conures are touchy-feely birds, and that's what endears them to us. I agree with others that spending time socializing is more important than the actual act of handfeeding. Conures cuddle and touch and preen each other all the time in groups. If we don't interject ourselves as part of that “flock,” then they will choose other birds. However, if we become their flock, it is understandable that they would need our companionship—that's in their nature.



Even if they are co-parented, if they are to be a companion and not a breeder, we have to accept the responsibility for that balance of fulfilling their natural need for flocking, including the closeness that goes with that. Although this varies among species, my personal observations lead me to conclude that birds handfed from tiny and totally dependent on people tend to have the higher incidences of neurotic “needy” behavior (versus healthy flock-needy behavior). I have heard suns referred to as “bird kittens,” and I think the problem with that is that they are NOT kittens, and too many times those that don’t develop sufficient independent behavior may develop instead some degree of clingy, neurotic behavior such as screaming incessantly.

How hard it must be for these wonderful feathered creatures! Here we are, mostly-water giants, louder than most of them, with huge eyes that stare at them, octopus appendages that reach for them, and hands that encircle their tiny bodies. How incredible that many of them enjoy that! Can you even imagine being in their position? I’m not anthropomorphizing, but just trying to “walk in their feathers.”



I read a comment that we might be “going backwards” with co-parenting, but I wonder if we’ve actually gone on a “path of convenience.” I’ve corresponded with Martijn Christenhusz in Europe and read comments from Mike Owen in Australia, both of whom say that co-parented or even parent-raised youngsters with intervention around weaning time is equal, if not preferable, to early handfeeding and can produce quality companion birds.

I don’t want my babies to identify only with people—I want them to know they are birds and be able to get along with other birds. Even if they are solo companions, I believe they often may be able to adjust better than ones that focus so much on people that when they’re left alone all day, they don’t deal well with extended periods of solitude (which, after all, is not a natural situation for flock creatures).

Katy McElroy, who breeds cockatoos, installed nest box cameras and observed in detail the interactions between her pair of Moluccan Cockatoos and their chick (which they raised to past fledging). Her findings were presented at AAV and other conventions. What is incredible is the level of interaction between parents and chick, and the amount of care, attention, and instruction provided to the chick. It would be practically impossible to duplicate that level of involvement in a breeder’s nursery. I found this true also with the suns. S&S allow me to raise the tip of their bootbox and watch their interaction with their chicks. It is with incredible delicateness that Solay will tongue and caress the featherless wingtips of a week old baby, and preen the downy body fuzz so that it is immaculately clean.



A detailed and lively (controversial) discussion on the topics of incubation, handrearing, parent-raised, etc., took place on the Holistic Bird site in 2002. This included the insightful observations of Pamela Clark, further reinforcing for me the value of exploring more effective alternatives than mass-producing parrot babies for a sometimes impulse-buying public. I also am convinced that we need to educate and sensitize in order to raise awareness and responsible thinking about these wonderful feathered creatures who are our companions.

Other Relevant Sites

1. “Rearing Intended Pets vs. Intended Breeder Birds,” E.B. Cravens: <http://www.parrot-behaviour.info/library/dloads/cravens5.pdf>
2. “Rearing the Chick” (excellent series of articles, views co-parenting more to producing calm breeders): http://home.rochester.rr.com/thecaiques/Manual/22_rearing_the_chick.htm
3. “The Importance of Co-parenting from Parrots to People” (Companion Bird Quarterly): <http://www.petbirdreport.com/articles/webshank.html>
4. “Should You Breed Your Pet Parrot?” Kashmir Csaky: <http://www.silvio-co.com/cps/articles/1998/1998csaky1.htm>

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