When a foal loses his dam, he’ll need help to grow both physically and mentally. Here’s how to meet those challenges.
The sight of an orphan foal, looking tiny and scared in a large box stall, will touch anyone’s heart. All of your protective, nurturing instincts will be stirred by the sound of his high-pitched whinny as he calls for his dam. The urge to dote on, comfort and indulge that youngster will be overwhelming. But you must resist.

Orphan foals face not only physical challenges but also behavioral and emotional hurdles. Without a dam to teach a youngster how to behave “like a horse,” a foal may grow up ill-prepared for life in the herd. And the extensive handling—often bordering on coddling—that some orphans receive can make them pushy and ill-mannered when they grow up. Some of the most maladjusted, difficult horses I’ve met in my years of rescue work were orphan foals raised by well-meaning but misguided people.

Don’t get me wrong: I admire anyone willing to take on the challenge of raising an orphan foal. But I would encourage them to be mindful of how good intentions fueled by compassion can backfire when it comes to raising a foal, and the problems created may not be evident until the situation is difficult to correct. When decisions about the foal are made with that understanding, it’s possible, and even easy, to raise an orphan foal to be a well-mannered member of any herd.

Raising an orphan foal takes an incredible amount of time and effort. Indeed, many of the behavior problems of orphan foals stem from their early days of intensive care. When a youngster interacts more with people than other horses, he begins to see them as his herd and never learns to relate to them properly. A prime example is an orphan foal who seeks out his human caretakers for security and comfort. Sleeping in a youngster’s stall, which I know many people do for practical reasons, can create that kind of attachment. When scared, the foal might “snuggle” up to or hide behind the person, as he would his dam. This behavior is adorable and provides some wonderful positive feedback to the hardworking caregiver, but in a few short weeks “snuggling” becomes “crowding” and then in a few months, “trampling.”

I know many popular training ideologies encourage people to use techniques based on herd dynamics and hierarchies to shape a horse’s behavior, but the practical reality is that it can be dangerous for your horse to interact with you as he would with another horse, even if you “outrank” him. He needs to view you as a human who outranks him.

Play behavior is another area where the horse/human distinction can become dangerously blurred with orphan
LOUD AND CLEAR: Horses use body language to tell each other to “back off.” An orphan foal who has never been around other horses, however, may not speak “horse” fluently enough to get the message.

foals. Watch a group of mares and foals in the pasture: The youngsters play with each other, but if they get rough with their dams, the mares move away and refuse to interact with them. As the foal gets older, if he roughhouses around his dam, she may kick or nip to drive him away to a more appropriate distance. Most foals learn pretty quickly to respect their dams and not play with them. Yet, you’ll often see people who think it’s “cute” to play tag with foals, and they’ll allow the baby to nudge them with their nose, then run off. This won’t be so cute when he’s a yearling.

This isn’t to say you shouldn’t spend time with an orphan foal; he does need lots of care and handling. Just keep in mind that your presence isn’t going to make up for his lack of a mother, and another horse is a far more suitable companion for him.

From a mare’s point of view, there is no overlooking bad behavior because her foal is cute or she feels sorry for him, two traps that many people fall into when raising orphan foals.

...NOT ENOUGH DISCIPLINE

From the moment a foal is born, his dam lays down certain ground rules and enforces them consistently. From a mare’s point of view, there is no overlooking bad behavior because her foal is cute or she feels sorry for him, two traps that many people fall into when raising orphan foals.

Behavior problems take root when the foal is just a few days old and may go unnoticed. He may nibble on his handler’s coat or even suck on fingers as if nursing. It’s cute and doesn’t hurt.
But eventually the foal’s teeth come in, and he starts nipping, which does hurt. Cow kicks from a days-old foal can be amusing. Even if he connects, you’re not likely to get much more than a bruise. It won’t take long, however, for those kicks to become a serious threat. I’ve actually seen foals who have been allowed to rear up and put their front legs on a handler’s shoulders. That behavior in a grown horse can be deadly.

Orphan foals that grow up to be pushy or nippy simply never learned proper behavior. Later, when they are corrected, they get confused and frustrated. Discipline can be tough to dole out, whether it’s for kids, dogs or horses. It gets even more complicated when you’re dealing with the orphan foal from a beloved lost mare. But without consistent discipline, these cherished foals may grow up to be monsters.

**WHY HERDMATES MATTER**

Exposure to other horses is critical for orphan foals. One mare I know who had been an orphan simply had no idea what the rules of the herd were. When we turned her out with other horses, she went right up to the alpha mare and got in her space. The mare kicked her to tell her to back off, but this poor horse had no idea how to react and just kept going back for more abuse. You could see the look on the alpha mare’s face: She wasn’t being cruel; she just couldn’t understand why this mare wasn’t getting the hint with each kick. And, of course, there was no way to explain the mare’s background and why she needed some slack.

Even if you plan on keeping the orphan foal as a single horse for his entire life, it’s still important for him to develop basic equine social skills. If you go to a show or group trail ride, for instance, a horse who was never appropriately socialized might be frightened by the presence of other horses or so excited he won’t listen to his handler. These are dangerous situations.

The sooner you can expose an orphan foal to other horses, the better. Not only do most grown horses seem a bit “gentler” when correcting a young horse, but younger horses tend to get the message more quickly. I don’t think anyone has studied and defined a “window of opportunity” for learning herd behavior, but in my own experience, the longer a horse is kept alone, the harder it is for him to learn to cope with other horses.

**GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESS**

Obviously, when a foal is orphaned, the best thing you can do for him is to quickly find a nurse mare. If the mare accepts the foal (see “Meet Your New Mom,” page 62) and is able to nurse him, he will have most of his physical and mental needs met. If you can’t find a mare to raise your orphan foal, the next best choice is a “babysitter” gelding. Obviously, a gelding can’t provide the nutritional support a mare can, but he can offer the social education and companionship a foal needs.

If you can’t find a mare or gelding to “adopt” an orphan foal, your only other option is to raise him yourself. To accomplish this without creating behavior problems down the road requires commitment and consistency.

One of your first goals will be to get the foal to eat out of a bucket as soon as
If a foal is orphaned before he gets a chance to nurse, you'll need to find a source of colostrum as soon as possible. This antibody-rich first milk protects the foal from disease and is crucial to the formation of his immune system. The ability of the gut to absorb colostrum decreases rapidly after the first 24 hours, however.

Some veterinary clinics maintain a colostrum bank. Members donate colostrum when their mares foal and can make a “withdrawal” if they ever need one. Many banks sell colostrum to non-members. Your veterinarian can help you find a colostrum bank in your area.

If colostrum isn’t available, various oral and intravenous equine immunoglobulin G (IgG) products are available that can provide antibodies. Whether colostrum or an IgG product is used, your veterinarian will analyze the foal’s blood between 12 and 24 hours after he is born to determine his immunity level.

The next step is putting the youngster on milk replacer. Years ago, orphan foals were raised on mixtures of cow’s milk and corn syrup. Such preparations kept foals alive but fell far short of optimum nutrition. These days, commercial milk replacers are available that are specially formulated for the nutritional needs of foals. Most are powders that are mixed with water for feeding, but sometimes the ratio recommended is too strong for a foal’s delicate gut; if the foal develops diarrhea, diluting the milk another quarter to third with water should help. Pelleted milk replacers for older foals are also available.

It’s critical to offer a foal small, frequent meals during the first month of life to encourage normal growth. Offering milk from a bucket every two hours is the best way to keep the foal looking for milk. After the first month the meals can be spread out, particularly if the foal is eating a feed and hay or grass.

When a foal is about 2 weeks old, you can begin offering him a commercial “creep feed” grain mix specially formulated for young foals. When he’s a month old, you can put out good-quality hay for him. This may seem early, but a foal with his dam will begin nibbling at her grain and hay around these ages also. As the foal increases his grain intake, you can cut back on the milk replacer. By the time the foal is 3 months old, he’ll no longer need milk replacer. Consult with your veterinarian if you have any questions about the appropriate feed for your foal.

**Feeding Tips:**

Bottle-feeding may be necessary during an orphan’s first few days of life, but switching to bucket feeding as soon as possible benefits both foal and handler.

As far as discipline goes, immediately correct any behavior in an orphan foal that you wouldn’t accept in a full-grown horse. This means no nipping, kicking, pushing...
or crowding. Your corrections need to be instant and very clear. Think of a mare correcting her foal: She’ll deliver a sharp nip or kick (you can deliver the same with the palm of your hand and sharp “NO”) and then walk away and ignore the foal. Don’t be swayed by a foal who scampers off to the corner of the stall and “sulks” for a moment or two when admonished. That’s how you know you’ve made your point.

It’s important to start this discipline program the moment the foal is born. Babies learn much more quickly than older horses, who might have bad habits and behavior patterns ingrained. And you’ll be in a better position physically to deliver corrections when the foal is small. It’s never “too late” to correct poor behavior in an orphan foal, but it’s certainly much, much easier when they are small.

It’s also crucial to continue to look for equine companionship for your foal. If a nurse mare or babysitter gelding isn’t immediately available, keep looking. If you can’t find a horse suitable to share a paddock with a foal, consider one you can keep in an adjacent space; contact through a fence or stall bars is better than none at all. Failing that, invite a friend to trailer in a calm horse you can introduce the foal to, even for a few hours at a time, or look into boarding your foal at a small facility.

Orphan foals start life at a significant disadvantage. Mares are, by far, the best equipped to raise the next generation of horses. But when it’s not possible to find a nurse mare for an orphan, a dedicated person with the right resources and a pragmatic mindset can fill that role. It’s a tough job, but one that brings huge rewards when the orphan foal grows into a healthy, strong and well-mannered horse.