Handling your Baby

Hi, my name is Dr. David Brust, and I’ve been a practicing exotic veterinarian for the last 25 years. I’m the author of “Sugar Gliders: A Complete Veterinary Care Guide” – and I’m also the president of the Association of Sugar Glider Veterinarians.

The purpose of this video series is to cut through all the internet misinformation out there, and teach owners like you the best - veterinary-approved - ways to raise and care for sugar gliders.

Now, just to make sure we’re all on the same page here, sugar gliders are also commonly known as “sugar bears” and “honey gliders” – and with that in mind, the goal of this video is to show you some effective ways to handle these little guys.

This is Tinkerbell, and most of the time I have either her, or one of my other pet gliders with me on my body all day long. Generally speaking, once you’ve bonded with your sugar glider, you can basically pick them up and play with them anytime you want without worrying about them jumping off. However, in the early stages of bonding, they don’t know you from a table or a door, so they’ll almost always jump off you if they can.

Now, on an earlier video we showed you the best way to pick your baby up and get them into your hands or a bonding pouch. Now it’s time to learn a few different techniques for handling these little guys.

First, once you have them in your hands – either in a nesting cloth or a bonding pouch – just “roll” them into your other hand like this. Now, take your other hand and “cup” the baby between your hands like this, pressing down gently until the baby stops crying.

The important thing here is to understand that since sugar gliders are marsupials - and their mom has a pouch – their whole idea of safety is a tight, dark place. Therefore, when you hold them like this between your hands, they feel very safe and secure.

Now, having said that, the biggest mistake new parents make when doing this technique is that they hold the baby too loosely because they are afraid of crushing it. When they “cup” their hands like this, allowing the baby to move around a little, it actually makes it feel less secure, and stresses it out.

Always remember, baby gliders feel the most safe and secure when they are held firmly – so if you have the baby in your hands like this and it’s “crying” sound, just gently squeeze more firmly on it and it will almost always calm down. Sometimes this

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may take a minute or so, but if you hold them firmly enough – long enough - they will almost always settle down.

Now, for the first day or two of bonding, just holding them like this – and wearing them around in a bonding pouch – is really all you need to do. When it comes to bonding, it’s always best to take your time and go slowly. At this stage, what you’ll typically find is that a few minutes after calming down, they’ll usually end up just going to sleep right in your hands. This is exactly what you want, and once they’ve fallen asleep, you can even give them a little massage with your thumb like this – and they’ll love it.

Once you’ve gotten them to the point where they are falling asleep in your cupped hands pretty regularly, the next step is to start letting them move around between your hands. To do that, start by kind of feeling where their head is in your hands, and moving them around a little so you can slide one thumb underneath their chin. Then, pick them up by holding their body firmly and keeping your index finger on top of their head.

By putting your thumb underneath their chin like this – and keeping your index finger on top of their head like this, you’ll be able to keep good control of their head, and the rest of your hand can then hold their body securely. This also helps them feel safe – and they can’t easily scoot out one way or the other.

Now this technique will probably take a few days of practice to get used to, but once you have it down, this is a very good way to handle a sugar glider of any age. In fact, this is the same technique I use in my practice to handle fully-grown adult gliders that have hardly ever been held by a human – and it works great.

Again, once you’ve got the baby held securely in one hand, your goal should be to let it get familiar with you by taking your other hand and massaging it. Again, don’t be discouraged at first if the baby puts up a fuss when you do this, because remember, their natural instinct is to try to protect itself by intimidating anything around it. You just have to be firm and show the little guy who’s boss.

Like I said earlier, once you’ve started massaging it like this, don’t be surprised if they start to get drowsy and go to sleep after just a few minutes. This is exactly what you want to happen, because when the fall asleep in your hand it’s a clear sign that they are beginning to trust you.

Now, once you have them in one hand, and they’ve calmed down a little, it’s time to slowly let them start moving around in your hands. You do this by making a little “tunnel” with your other hand like this, and then letting the animal slowly crawl forward by removing your index finger above its head and releasing a little pressure on its body.

Now, again, you’ll probably have to practice this technique a few times, because when they aren’t bonded to you yet, they will try almost anything to get out of your hands. It just takes a little time, and consistent practice, but the idea here is to just let the baby go from one hand to the other so it looks like this.

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When you start doing this, you’ll find they’ll usually sit still for a couple seconds, and then try to scoot backwards or forwards all of a sudden. This is natural, because at this point you are still in the very early stages of bonding with your baby. Just alternate between a minute or two of “walking” – and then hold them in one hand and massage them for a little while. Go back and forth between walking and massaging - doing these sessions a few times every day – and pretty soon the baby will start to get used to you.

One last thing about this technique. Sugar gliders are a lot like us humans, in that when they wake up from a long nap, one of the first things they want to do is go to the bathroom. Therefore, in the early stages of doing this technique, don’t be surprised if you get a little poop and pee on you. We’ll show you the best way to “potty-train” your sugar gliders, and minimize accidents like this, in another video. 😊