Video: Watch how a breastfeeding mom teaches an orangutan how to nurse

Zoe the orangutan needed help breastfeeding. Her first baby, Taavi, had to be hand-raised after she failed to nurse him and hold him properly. It’s likely Zoe never learned how to be a mom since she was orphaned at nine months old when her own mother died unexpectedly. Metro Richmond Zoo staff were determined to teach Zoe how to nurse successfully for her next baby.

When Zoe delivered her second baby on December 12, 2022, our vet contacted Whitlee Turner, a zookeeper and new mom herself, for an extraordinary favor. Whitlee was asked to breastfeed her own baby Caleb in front of Zoe in hopes that Zoe would learn from a live demonstration. Whitlee agreed to help and she and her son arrived at the orangutan’s indoor house soon after Zoe gave birth.

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Whitlee was excited to share her breastfeeding knowledge with Zoe. Of the experience, she said:

I just had my breastfeeding bra on, and I was able to show [Zoe] everything with zero modesty. I wanted her to be able to see the whole process because orangutans don’t wear shirts. I wanted her to be able to see my breasts and see Caleb and be able to see him rooting and looking for it and the latch.

With my bra down, I was very exaggerated when I put him on so that [Zoe] could see that the baby goes here. The whole time I was talking to her and pointing at her, pointing at the baby, pointing at her breasts. And when Caleb was latched I was showing it to her, making sure that she saw the important part.

The whole time she just kept watching me curiously. She didn’t immediately breastfeed her baby, but she was definitely watching the whole time.”

Less than 24 hours later, Zoe nursed her baby for the first time. The breastfeeding demonstration was successful, but that’s not all it took to help Zoe. For months before giving birth, zookeepers worked with her tirelessly to kickstart her maternal instincts. Zoe’s caretakers set up a TV inside, so she could watch videos of orangutan mothers giving birth and caring for their young. She watched the videos over and over again and learned from these experienced mothers.

Jessica Gring, a lead zookeeper, even showed Zoe how to hold and nurse a baby by using a stuffed animal orangutan. She did these demonstrations almost daily for months. Jessica said:

“I would have [the stuffed animal] so it was going around my waist and around my neck just like a baby would be clinging on to [Zoe’s] side.

I was able to grab some biscuits on the ground and pretend like I was eating them while I was holding the
baby. I was able to show [Zoe] and spread [the stuffed animal’s] legs a little bit and hold them up to the front so [Zoe] would see and check it out. After he was born, [Zoe] immediately came over and did the exact same thing and showed me and let me look at his feet and his body.

The idea is we want to be able to get a good view on body condition and overall wellness check, so she was able to do exactly mirror image of what we had shown her which was really, really exciting.”

Zoe and her unnamed baby boy are healthy and bonding well. They can be seen at the zoo daily from the Safari Train Ride. The zoo is grateful to our dedicated and creative professionals who are committed to helping Zoe. Their diligent efforts paid off. Reflecting on the experience, Whitlee said:

I had a really hard time in the beginning as a new mom with my breastfeeding journey. [I] required a lot of guidance and help before we really figured it out. I think it was really special being able to share this with [Zoe] and help her in her journey. Whether it was an orangutan or a human, I just want to be able to help any new mom.

The orangutan is a critically endangered species native to Borneo and Sumatra. They are the second largest of all primates, with adult males weighing up to 350 pounds. Their gestation is 8 and a half months.

“Orangutan” means “Man of the Woods” in Malay. They are classified as apes, not monkeys. These beautiful creatures are among some of the most intelligent animals in the animal kingdom. Unfortunately, they have been victims of poaching and deforestation, resulting in a critically endangered status. Deforestation for the establishment of palm oil plantations is the primary cause of their habitat loss.

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