

Mama's Boys: Dam-Raising Packgoats for Success

By Nan Hassey, Goat-O-Rama



According to conventional packgoat wisdom, Phil and I are “doing it wrong.” We *dam-raise* our kids! I know, it’s practically unheard of among packgoat breeders. Nearly every article and book I’ve read about packgoats emphatically states that all packgoats **MUST** be bottle-raised. Dam-raised kids are skittish and will never bond with humans!

Call me a rebel, but when I started breeding packgoats, I refused to follow the crowd. My first kidding experience had left me somewhat traumatized when my friend whisked the brand new kids away from their mother and into the house to dry them off and feed bottles. While everyone else fussed over the cute kids, I couldn’t stop listening to the plaintive cries of their mother standing alone in the dark, wondering where her babies were and why she wasn’t allowed to clean and nurse them herself. She eventually got over it, but I didn’t. A moment that should have been joyous felt heartbreaking to me. If pulling kids

was necessary to goat breeding, I wasn’t sure I wanted any part of it.

Well, it was too late to change my mind. My girls were already bred, but I was determined to do things differently. I understand completely why others bottle-raise and I won’t argue with their reasoning, but it was not something I wanted for *my* herd. The question for me was how to raise these babies on their dams while still ensuring a strong human bond.

First, I started with friendly mothers. While possible, it is much harder to raise friendly babies from mothers that fearfully try to hide their kids away from people. The kids will almost always pick up on at least some of her skittishness.

Second, it is imperative that the mothers be healthy. CAE is a common disease and is primarily spread from dam to kid through milk. I had my goats tested before our first kidding season, and I have tested every year since in order to prove my herd is still clean. A CAE-positive doe would need to have her kids pulled at birth so they could be raised on CAE-negative or pasteurized milk. There are several other less common diseases that can also spread through milk, so before dam-raising your kids, draw blood on your does and have them tested for any diseases that could potentially infect her offspring.

If your does are friendly and healthy, there is no reason why they can’t raise friendly, healthy kids provided you take the time to make sure they bond with humans as well as with other goats. I like to attend every goat birth so that the first things a baby goat sees, hears, feels, and smells are their mother and



humans working together to dry it, warm it, and help it find milk. The first time I check on the new babies, they come toddling toward me as part of their family. They never learn what it means to run from a human.

Sometimes people ask me whether it's ok for a baby goat to jump on people, climb on laps, chew hair, etc. My response is "Absolutely!" This is one of the funnest aspects of raising goats, so never discourage a young kid from using you for a jungle gym. It's important not to quash their playfulness and curiosity.

I like to take my cues from the mothers. I've noticed that mother goats are very permissive with young kids. Kids get to climb on mama, tug her ears, chew her wattles, and even use her belly for a trampoline. She (and even my older non-related herd members) are very tolerant of young kids' antics, but as the kids grow, their tolerance fades until eventually kids are no longer allowed to take the same liberties they did when they were brand new. Phil and I follow a similar progression. Very young kids are allowed to satisfy their curiosity about hair, buttons, zippers, shoelaces, and climbing on people, but as they grow these curious behaviors morph into a demand for attention.

Kids rapidly become big, bold, and mature enough to handle a bit more discipline in their lives. Within a week or two the older herd members have laid down the law, and soon the mothers start to enforce personal boundaries as well. Since the kids are already learning correct behavior from the other goats, having them learn it from humans is not a big leap. We brush them aside when they try to jump on us, and we remove hair and clothing items from their mouths. There's rarely a need to punish a young kid, but they do need to be



taught boundaries before they get big enough to become a nuisance.

One of the things Phil and I do when our kids are under a month old is we bring them into the house every night while we watch TV. They usually spend about two hours sleeping on our laps before we put them back with their moms. We also spend time playing with them outdoors. We take all of our goats for one or two walks around our property every day so the kids learn to follow us along with the rest of the herd.

Kids love interactive play. They don't have to see you as a walking meal in order to bond to you. They can also bond

to you because you are fun to hang out with! I have a doe who, when she is not raising kids of her own, spends a lot of time playing with other goats' babies. She's the "cool aunt" of the herd and the kids adore her despite the fact that she never feeds them. I have found this instructive in our dam-raising journey.



I see some distinct advantages to dam-raising kids. First, I don't have to maintain as many pens. My goats live together in one herd made up of multiple ages and sexes. The kids grow up within a healthy herd structure which is less prone to producing bullies and outcasts than herds that are made up of all similar ages. I like to say a herd of all young goats takes on a "Lord of the Flies" resemblance. By contrast, in a herd with mixed ages, senior goats teach the youngsters about discipline while also shielding them from bullies. I feel this is good for a youngster's social and psychological development and leads to fewer problems in their interactions with humans later on.

Another advantage to dam-raising is that kids get a lot more early growth and are less prone to health issues. One of the pitfalls to raising bottle kids is that it's hard for humans to give them enough



round-the-clock feedings to mimic the natural feeding schedule kept up by goat mothers. We compress bottle feedings to 2-4 times/day and give more milk per feeding to compensate for the less frequent meals. A goat nursing from its mother is going to be able to take in more milk in 24 hours than a bottle kid without ever having as much milk in its belly at one time. This aids in rapid early bone growth and weight gain with less potential for digestive problems. Dam-raised kids also start eating solid foods at an earlier age and rarely need to be fed grain.

While dam-raised kids may generally be healthier than bottle-raised, it is critical to monitor their health daily. An advantage to bottle raising is that it forces you to look at your kids at least twice a day, so it's easy to catch and treat problems early on. It is just as important that your dam-raised kids be carefully evaluated for their health on a daily basis. I had a kid last summer who began to look unthrifty when she was about 6-8 weeks old. The mother had a blocked teat which I was having to milk out by hand. Both kids refused to touch the difficult teat, but the larger kid was hogging the easy one. I ended up training the smaller kid to take a bottle

twice a day so she could bloom again. Eventually the mother's teat unplugged and the kid was able to nurse normally, but she could have lost a lot of ground if I had not been paying close attention to her body condition.

Dam-raising allows me to take time that I otherwise would have spent preparing bottles and put it toward playing with the kids. One reason bottle-raising is so successful is that it forces you to spend time with your kids at least 2-3 times a day without fail. Never let dam-raising make you lazy! That 2-3 times/day interaction is just as critical for the dam-raised kid. The amount of time matters less than frequency and consistency, which is what bottle-feeding forces you to provide.



One of my favorite things about keeping kids with their mamas is watching the sweet interaction that happens between doe and kid. Mother goats love their babies, and I love to share the experience of raising kids with them, but I would never want to deprive them of it. I love seeing kids snuggle up and sleep against the warm, reassuring softness of their gentle mother. I love watching the mothers clean and nurture their little ones and come running when

they call. Nothing puts a smile on my face like seeing a new mother lick and nuzzle her tiny, wet offspring, help him to his feet, and nudge him toward the milk. It's a special and important bond that I don't think humans can fully replace. We can share in the experience and form our own unique bond with these kids that is just as strong and just as important without any need to replace their natural mother.

This article has been aimed at breeders, but to you buyers out there, do not automatically shun a dam-raised kid. If done well, dam-raising can produce kids every bit as friendly and bonded as any bottle baby. The kids in this last photo are seven weeks old and clearly love people. They're too old to be still jumping up, but I can forgive a kid for being "too friendly." We'll work on manners when my hands aren't full!

