

# MOMMY *dearest?*

IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM THERE ARE NO PARENTING BOOKS OR CHILD EXPERTS. FOR MOTHERS, KNOWING WHAT TO DO IS A MATTER OF INSTINCT.

BY MELISSA SIEBERT

**S**OME OF THE BEST MOTHERS IN THE ANIMAL WORLD EAT THEIR CHILDREN. FILIAL CANNIBALISM, TO USE THE SCIENTIFIC JARGON, ISN'T EVERYDAY BEHAVIOUR, SURE, BUT DOES HAPPEN WITH SURPRISING REGULARITY. It's been recorded among fish, bears, dogs, cats, lions, chimpanzees, pigs, wolf spiders, house finches, even hamsters, particularly under stress. It's usually males who commit infanticide but if a mother perceives the environment to be unsuitable, food to be scarce or her young to be defective, they may become lunch.

'Eat your kids if you have to' may seem an unlikely child-rearing strategy, but these aren't necessarily bad moms. Nature isn't that simple.

"The mothers are basically saying it seems the situation we're in won't result in a high survival rate. The mother who returns the investment to her own body is more likely to survive," explains Justin O'Riain, a behavioural ecologist at the University of Cape Town.

Investment is the key word here and the logic behind much animal mothering (and fathering). Only 10 per cent of male mammal species assist with child rearing and it doesn't get much better among insects, amphibians or reptiles. It's the female of the species who mostly raise or invest in the kids. ▶

**A MOTHER'S WORK IS NEVER DONE** Not only does a lioness have to suckle and feed her cubs, she may also have to resort to deceit to protect them from aggressive males.



**THIS WAY, LOVE** Elephant calves have little innate knowledge and rely on their mothers to teach them about the world.

AFRICA IMAGERY

**AN ELEPHANT CAN SPEND UP TO FIVE YEARS SUCKLING HER YOUNG**

“It’s down to the certainty of being the parent,” O’Riain says. “If you are certain as the male that you are the father, you’re more likely to help with the offspring. In most mammals, fertilisation takes place internally. The sperm is deposited and the male has to hope that this will result in fertilisation. Fathering is better in external fertilisers like fish, who can see their own sperm cover the eggs laid by the female. There’s a certainty of paternity. When males are guaranteed paternity, you’ll find paternal care.”

In general, females make greater investments in their children. Female mammals, particularly, are bound to parenting behaviour through long gestation and lactation periods. Without mother’s milk, babies perish, the species doesn’t survive.

Though female animals are hard-wired to mother, they don’t always meet parenting standards defined by humans. “Research is blowing the myths away,” O’Riain says. “The more we learn, the more we see a lot of poor parenting. My research among naked mole rats, for instance, has shown that the females’ contribution to mothering is limited to rolling on their backs and

exposing their breasts.” Hardly candidates for Mother of the Year.

An interesting phenomenon in the animal motherworld is allomothering, when individuals who are not the birth mother step in to mother the offspring. This collective raising of young is not uncommon among mammals, particularly group-living species.

Female lions run crèches for their collective children. Elephants are renowned for the matriarch-led herd collaborating to raise and protect their young. Lion, brown hyena and elephant moms often give birth at the same time so they are lactating simultaneously and can thus feed each other’s offspring. They are often second cousins too, so have a mutual interest in preserving the family gene pool. In such species, females seem to adopt the adage ‘it takes a village to raise a child.’

Psychotherapist Mandy Young has been studying elephant, dolphin, wild dog and meerkat moms for nearly a decade. She takes people on healing journeys to learn from animal social behaviour and

tells a poignant story of allomothering.

“Three months after a calf named Charlie was born at the Pongola Reserve, a calf was still-born to another cow. Constance spent several days trying to awaken her dead calf. At first she turned away from Charlie, but then she became overbearingly possessive. She even disrupted his normal sleeping patterns because she would constantly wake him up if he lay as still as her dead calf had. Constance ended up more affectionate to Charlie than his own mom.”

Being a mom is a hard job and some animal moms are truly awe-inspiring. “I’ve always been rather taken with a female scorpion carrying her 20 or so young around on her back, from kill to kill,” says O’Riain. “Or South American frogs whose babies grow out of their backs. Or meerkats where females who didn’t have the babies produce milk for the alpha female’s young.”

You have to admire the cleverness of lionesses when it comes to dealing with dominant males taking over the pride and potentially killing their young.



**TAGGING ALONG** A young dolphin swims in its mother’s slipstream, enabling mother and calf to keep up with the rest of the group.

AFRIPICS

Moms across the animal world do a lot of things right, intuitively. Dolphins sing to their children to calm them.



AFRICA IMAGERY – NIGEL DENNIS

**A MAN’S JOB** Meerkat moms aren’t left holding the baby – males do babysitting duty, too.

of things right, intuitively. Licking their babies clean at birth fixes their babies’ scent in their brains and firmly bonds them. Dolphins sing to their children to calm them. Primates carry their young around like extensions of their own bodies and physical contact is critical to an infant’s well-being. In baboon troops, savvy females with newborns tend to stay close to high-ranking males.

Are there really any bad moms? You could perhaps argue the cuckoo stands for all a mother should not be or do: she abdicates her responsibilities. She finds a host nest for her egg, replacing that of an unsuspecting bird – probably a reed warbler, meadow pipit or dunnock – then disappears. The host mom is left with a strange egg in her nest which, when hatched, becomes a monstrous thing who turfs out any other chicks and takes a whole lot of feeding.

But look closer: without junior to feed, mother cuckoo can get on with her biological mandate to produce more and more cuckoos. Ruthless and opportunistic, sure, but also just plain smart. After all, Mother knows best. 🐾

**Mr Mom**

Among certain group-living animals, males take some responsibility for their offspring. For instance among wild dogs, meerkats and baboons, an alpha male and alpha female will mate, then suppress breeding in others. As his paternity is more certain, the male is more likely to help care for the young, by feeding them or babysitting.

Though monogamy is rare in the animal world, where it does happen paternal care is even greater. Dad emperor penguins guard their egg through the dark winter days, keeping it off the ice by balancing it on the tops of their feet until it hatches. (The film *March of the Penguins* shows this beautifully.)

Unique in the animal world is the male seahorse, which gives birth to thousands of babies in a special brood pouch, a sort of mother-father.

“It’s up to the females to mate with as many males as they can so they’ll think they’re the father,” O’Riain says. “Baboons do this, too. Females must trick as many males as possible into thinking they’re the father, so they are less apt to kill the young.”

So, how do we humans and our ape cousins rank on the mothering scale? “Primates are good mothers, they have to be,” says O’Riain. “Their offspring are so useless. Look at a human child, it’s quite helpless. There is a huge maternal investment, while the father plays a role. Primates have just a few offspring and they invest very heavily in these few.”

Some infants are easier than others, as we all know. If your baby is precocious, then it’s up on its feet in a few minutes after birth and ready to run with the herd. And you’re probably a giraffe, wildebeest, impala or zebra. Many more babies are altricial or nearly defenceless at birth and need nurturing for months, even years. Spare a thought for mama elephant, however, who possibly spends the longest in the animal world suckling her young: up to five years.

Moms across the animal world do a lot