

FOSTER CARE

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If you have ever bottle raised a cria, you will know it is very time consuming and requires great commitment over a period of months. This article is about foster care – that is – getting another female to feed the cria for you. As well as taking the pressure off you as an owner, foster care means your cria will grow up knowing it is an alpaca, which can sometimes be an issue with bottle fed cria. It is important to understand this is not an easy process and you may not be able to achieve the desired result.

I think it is probably more likely that a female would adopt a cria belonging to a female related to her, or at least from her own herd. This article is about a cria coming in from another herd of unrelated alpacas. A lot of females would consider this cria to be “foreign” and would be less likely to accept it.

Choosing a foster mother

In a small herd, you may not have a suitable female available at the right time. In a larger herd, watch your females, particularly when you put out feed, and make a note of any female who allows a cria other than her own to feed from her. These females are potentially suitable for foster care.

It is essential to ensure that the proposed foster mother is holding good weight – preferably a body score of three or higher – as feeding two cria is going to be tough on her. It is also worth considering that it is less likely that a female feeding two cria will hold a pregnancy so it may be best to choose a female who is not pregnant.

Another option would be to choose a female whose own cria is ready to wean, wean her cria, and attempt to get her to adopt.

Gabriel

Gabriel, an orphan, arrived at Yaringa at five days of age in search of a foster mum.

We began by looking for an appropriate area to use when introducing the cria to the foster mum. I chose a 3 m x 3 m stable – two solid walls and two gates so there was plenty of air flow and the animals inside could see out easily.

We put in unlimited oaten hay, a small quantity of lucerne hay and some grain mix, and, of course, water.



Foster mum 1: Kimberley – a five year old female with her second cria at foot.

When we introduced Gabriel, Kimberley tended to ignore him and kept eating grain which suggested she may accept him. Unfortunately Kimberley’s six week old cria had other ideas and kept pushing Gabriel away so he was never able to get near Kimberley’s back end. We watched for some time but it wasn’t going to work.

Foster mum 2: Tiara – a three year old female with her first cria at foot.

Tiara was extremely offended by Gabriel’s presence and kept spitting at him and in the end he sat in the corner. At this point we decided to give up and try again the next day.

Foster mum 3: Isobella – a two year old female with her first cria at foot.

Isobella was very busy eating but occasionally turned and sniffed Gabriel. Isobella's cria Milano was only three days old and smaller than Gabriel. Within minutes, Gabriel was sniffing around Isobella looking for milk. Isobella moved from grain to hay, paying little attention to either cria, and with a bit of prompting Gabriel started to feed from her. I left them to it and came back an hour later to find Isobella feeding both cria. This of course was only step one.

For the first 24 hours it is really important to keep checking the cria in case the foster mother changes her mind about having the cria close as it is very easy for a young cria to get injured by an unhappy adult. I kept a couple of other females in the area outside the stable so Isobella didn't worry about being away from the herd.

After 48 hours Isobella and the two cria were let out into a bigger area – about 10 m by 10 m and were joined by two other females not currently feeding cria.

Creating enough milk for two cria

The next step was to ensure Isobella was able to provide enough milk for both cria. It quickly became apparent that Gabriel was going to dominate the milk supply and Milano could easily miss out, so the decision was made to keep bottle feeding Gabriel in the short term. For the first week Gabriel was given four feeds per day taking between 150 and 200 mL per feed. We also attempted to feed Milano but this was not successful. At least if we fed Gabriel it gave Milano several opportunities each day to feed without interference and supplementary feeding one cria gave Isobella's milk supply time to catch up with demand.

Adequate nutrition for the mother is essential. Isobella had access to unlimited oaten hay and was also given grain mix each day. Most of our females feeding cria are given 1 kg of mix per day (oaten chaff, lucerne chaff, whole oats and crushed lupins). Isobella started with 1 kg but this was increased each day until she got to 2 kg per day.

In the second week Gabriel was given three feeds per day taking 250 mL per feed.

In the third week Gabriel was given three feeds per day taking 300 mL per feed. It was noticeable though that Gabriel was getting more difficult to catch each time and would spit when he was caught, but he would then feed.

In the fourth week, Gabriel was given two feeds per day and was offered 300 mL per feed – but bit by bit he was drinking less and less so by the end of that week we decided to give him 24 hours without a bottle. Even a cria needing two bottles a day would be much easier for someone who works full time to manage than a cria who needs to be fed every couple of hours.



After 24 hours Gabriel was offered a bottle again but he refused to take it so this was the end of bottle feeding.

On week three I put another female with a similar aged cria at foot into the pen as this cria needed daily treatment for an injury. This was a mistake as the third cria started feeding from Isobella also.

Cria development

What really surprised me was that Isobella's weight really did not change through this process. At the time of writing this article, the two cria are just over three months old – and Isobella has a body score of 4.

From the beginning we tracked the weight of both cria to ensure that both were continuing to gain weight. It is clear from the table below that the cria growth is not linear – i.e., they do not put on the same amount of weight each time – but both cria have gained weight every time they were weighed.

<i>DATE</i>	<i>GABRIEL – born 11/4/2011</i>	<i>MILANO – born 16/4/11</i>	<i>Difference</i>
22/4/11	9.7	7.3	2.4
27/4/11	10.1	8.3	1.8
1/5/11	10.7	8.6	2.1
8/5/11	11.2	9.5	1.7
15/5/11	12.5	10.7	1.8
22/5/11	13.7	11.3	2.4
5/6/11	14.7	12.0	2.7
17/7/11	18.0	15.9	2.1

Isobella does not seem to distinguish between the two cria, and treats both as hers, and the three of them are clearly a family.



We plan to wean both cria at about 5 months of age. Isobella has proved herself to be a true asset to our herd.