Before Consistent Reinforcement: Using Early Positive Exposure to Build Confidence and Resilience in a Mother-Raised Giraffe Calf

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Critical developmental periods provide unique opportunities to shape confidence, adaptability, and future training success before a young giraffe is consistently participating in reinforcement-based training. This presentation explores the developmental training journey of “Wheeler,” a mother-raised giraffe calf, and how intentional early exposure fostered confidence, behavioral resilience, and long-term success in a managed care environment.

Rather than waiting for consistent food-motivated participation, this approach focused on creating positive associations with novel stimuli, environments, tactile experiences, and husbandry concepts during critical developmental periods while maintaining a strong emphasis on agency, comfort, and the mother-calf relationship. Using systematic desensitization and low-pressure interactions, Wheeler was gradually introduced to new experiences in a manner that prioritized positive associations and voluntary participation.

Despite training sessions occurring only once per week due to staffing and scheduling limitations, Wheeler demonstrated steady progress, suggesting that consistency and strategic session design may be more influential than training frequency alone. Key milestones included introducing Wheeler to a training block at approximately six weeks of age, increasing comfort with human touch earlier than is often attempted with giraffe calves, and establishing foundational husbandry behaviors through positive exposure. By four months of age, Wheeler was voluntarily participating in positioning and handling behaviors for all four feet in preparation for future hoof care procedures.

This presentation will also highlight the importance of training setups and barn considerations when working with young calves and protective dams. Emphasis will be placed on how environmental arrangement, session flow, and trainer positioning directly influence calf confidence, dam comfort, and overall session success.

Through practical examples, developmental observations, and lessons learned, this case study suggests that intentional positive exposure during early development can establish husbandry foundations, improve welfare outcomes, and increase behavioral flexibility long before formal reinforcement-based training is fully established.