



Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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Handling Reptiles

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Handling

It may seem that how to hold an animal is self-evident, but it is surprising how many people, children and adults alike, can't seem to figure out what to do with a reptile. People who think nothing of handling various pet mammals and birds without thinking much about how to do it are often at a loss when confronted with something that has no fur or feathers. In fact, holding a reptile isn't much different than holding any other animal. You must support its body weight so that it feels comfortable and secure. You may need to figure out just where to put that tail so that it is comfortable for both of you. You may need one or two other people when safety concerns dictate that two or more of you hold a large boa, python, or monitor lizard. By and large, however, if you can pick up and hold a squirmy puppy or hissy cat without a problem, chances are you will have no problem picking up and holding reptiles.

One common misconception is that reptiles cannot feel. Not just "they can't feel pain", but "they can't feel it when I touch them/pinch them/hit them/drop them on the ground" kind of feel. Needless to say, reptiles can feel when they are touched, just as all other animals, including humans, can feel touch and pain. No matter how tame and socialized they are, reptiles are still wild animals. As such, they may not react the way we would, or the way we expect a dog or cat would, to being uncomfortable or to a painful stimulus, but that does not mean that they aren't uncomfortable or in pain. Some clues to a reptile feeling insecure, uncomfortable, or in pain:

- Bellows-like movement of the rib cage as the snake or lizard breaths heavily in and out; this may or may not be accompanied by hissing
- Fussiness (squirming, scrabbling its legs trying to climb or get away, or hissing) in a normally tame reptile who doesn't usually fuss when being held is a sign that something isn't right. The reptile may be getting ready to shed, or may see or smell something that is causing a flight, threat or defense response. (Note: many reptiles who are ready to defecate do not want to be held and will often squirm and struggle to get put down. Some will even try to turn around to aim their vent in a direction away from you. If a normally tame and sociable reptile suddenly acts like a little monster, think back to the last time it pooped, putting it back in its enclosure if it is about time for it to do so again!)
- Lizard claws dig into your flesh or clothing, or they scramble trying to climb you.
- Lizard thrashes around, doing crocodile rolls.
- Snake body wraps snugly-very snugly-around your arm, torso, or leg.
- Snake draws back into an S-curve, head and neck lifted a short distance off the ground.

The more confident you are in picking up and handling a reptile, the more comfortable and relaxed they will be with being picked up and handled, assuming you are doing it right, and not confident but wrong!

Reptiles do get to know people who interact with them, recognizing them by sight, scent, even the sound of the voice. They remember people who made them feel less than comfortable and secure, and may respond to those individuals by getting a bit hissy and/or drawing away from them. They also remember people who handle them properly, and it is not unusual for some lizards and snakes to approach such a person when it looks like they are going to be picked up. (Lest you flatter yourself for your Dr. Doolittle-like affect on animals, keep in mind that getting picked up usually means being on a nice warm body and getting out of the enclosure where there are far more interesting things to see and smell!)

The Basics

Respect the reptiles' natural inclinations and fears:

- Don't turn them upside down.
- Don't dangle them in the air.

- Don't hold them with two fingers.
- Don't squeal, no matter how weird or creepy it feels.
- Don't hold a prey animal in front of or in line of sight of a perceived predator.
- Don't relinquish control when passing the reptile to someone until you are certain they are holding it properly.
- Don't smell like prey.

Now that the don'ts are out of the way, the do's are:

- Do support their body weight and length.
- Do let them get comfortable on you - which may not be the same thing as you being comfortable with them.
- Do move calmly and smoothly, avoiding abrupt hand movements or changes in direction.
- Do be aware of what is going on around you and what may be stressful or alarming to the reptile, and either move away or make the situation go away.
- Do wash your hands before and after handling, cleaning, or servicing reptile and prey animal enclosures.

You are the reptiles' safety-net, their security. Even reptiles who may not be very tame will recognize their primary caretaker as being their "protector" when they are out of their enclosure and in a new situation, such as being surrounded by a classroom full of kids. Many such reptiles will grip or coil around the caretaker, making no move to get away. Don't get overly confident, however, and let your attention wander: this same reptile may decide that making a run for it is the best course of action, waiting only for you to relax a bit before making its getaway.

Students learn a great deal just by watching, but I have found that when it comes to handling reptiles, it is best to verbalize the handling basics (the do's and don'ts above) while modeling the proper way to do it.

For the sake and safety of the reptile, it should be made very clear than any intentionally inappropriate handling, including teasing a student who is uncomfortable with the reptiles, will result in the immediate loss of handling privileges.

Snakes

Pick them up gently. Support their body weight in your hand and, if they are long enough or heavy bodied, on or around your arm or torso.

If housing two or more snakes together and one snake is wrapped around or underneath another, gently unwrap/unbury each of them as you lift the one you want out.

When holding snakes out for people to touch, keep control of the snake's head - cup one hand under it so that you can gently direct it away from the person if they appear nervous.

When placing a snake on someone, especially a large one (relative to the size of the person holding it), place the middle of the snake's body around the back of the person's neck and down their back a little ways. Stand behind tall people to do this; with small children, you can stand in front or to the side of them and lift the snake over their head. Draping the snake's midsection down the person's back a little ways, with the snake's tail and head in front of the person, coming over their shoulders, they will be able to better balance the snake's weight, the snake will be less likely to constrict around any part of the person's neck as it shifts around, and the will person feel better seeing both ends of the snake. Let the person know which side the head is on as you are settling the snake in place. If need be, control the head for them until they feel comfortable enough to do it on their own. With a very nervous person, it may take a time or two before they can tolerate having the snake on them without your hand still in contact with it.

Watch for heavy breathing on the part of the snake. Watch for signs of nervousness on the part of the snake, particularly around people who are nervous. People communicate their nervousness to the reptile: the person trembles, or is shaky in holding, or makes tentative, jerky moves when trying to touch it, jerks or moves abruptly as the reptile moves. These behaviors are picked up by the snake with the result that they will usually grip their shaky branches - the person's arms or body - all the more tightly to make sure they don't fall.

This sets up a sort of negative feedback loop, with the tightening scaring the person, making them more nervous, which in turn makes the snake more nervous. Sometimes, just explaining that the reason why the snake is gripping tighter is because it is worried about falling, the person can force themselves to act more calmly, which usually helps them feel more calm, setting up a positive feed-back loop instead.

Lizards

Approach the lizard low and from the side. Overhead and from the back may scare them by making them think a predator is swooping down on them. Pick up the lizards by cupping your hand under their bellies, with your index finger up towards their neck between their forelegs, their rear end resting on your wrist/arm. Large lizards, such as iguanas and monitors, should be picked up two handed, with the second hand going under and lifting the lower abdomen, pelvis/hip, and tail base area.

If the lizard has a long body, be sure to support that body with your hand or arm when holding it or passing it to someone. Make sure they do the same.

If the lizard has a tail that can hurt if it whips, take care to keep it away from the faces of small children. Use your free hand to gently guide it away from the small kids. A comfortable way to hold large lizards with long whippy tails is to support their body along the length of your forearm, with your palm and fingers cupping them under their breast bone/neck, and their tail tucked loosely between the inside of your forearm and your ribcage.

Most lizards have claws and, while they may be small enough to not break the skin, many children, including teenagers, are scared or upset when they feel the claws. Claws can be regularly trimmed on many species without affecting their ability to climb. But even trimmed claws can elicit a "throw" response - the child throws it down or across the room out of fear, anger, or even surprise at the unexpected sensation. Watch and talk to children holding clawed lizards to assure they are not bothered by the claws. Sometimes, talking to the child about the claws, telling them that the lizard really isn't trying to hurt them, helps the child accept it. Just as touching a cold reptile may initially feel like it is slimy or wet, so too can the initial prick of little claws feel more like it hurts than what it really feels like: a tickle.

Many lizards will try to climb on top of the person's head. This indicates that they are nervous (or, as in the case of many iguanas, trying to get control of a person by climbing to the dominant position). If the child is closely surrounded by others, have the others back off. Do not let lizards stay on top of heads. They cannot be easily or safely controlled when up there. Carefully remove them from the head, taking care to disentangle the claws from the strands of hair, and place the lizard safely in hand again.

When lizards, especially large ones such as monitors and iguanas, try to climb or get settled on someone's chest or shoulder, they may reach a leg up high enough to inadvertently scratch the person's face--and eye. When transferring such a lizard to a person, especially a child, be sure to have your hand over the foot that is most likely to reach up towards the face. Tell the person what you are doing so she won't try to back away from your hand, thus exposing her face to the claws.

If the lizard starts to thrash and roll, do not restrain it by holding it tighter. Let it roll around in your hands, holding it slightly away from your body about chest high, and keep it away from other people's faces. Hold it straight up in the air, if necessary, until it calms down. If a lizard is thrashing around in someone else's hands, you can take the lizard from them and calm it down. Sometimes, just holding a lizard face-to-face (but keeping it out of biting distance!), and gently rocking from side-to-side or back-and-forth will help calm it down. After a minute or so, you can then carefully hand the lizard back to the person who was holding it.

Turtles and Tortoises

When they must be picked up, turtles should be supported with both hands, with fingers both on top of the carapace and underneath the plastron to support. They should be held more like a thick sandwich rather than a piece of dirty tissue.

"Swimming" in the air is not cute - it is a sign of stress in the turtle or tortoise. Chelonians need to feel something under their feet - even if it is just your fingers or palm.

As much as children may profess to love turtles and tortoises, many are actually nervous when allowed to hold them. It is quite common to see a child try to hold a turtle or tortoise with two fingers on the edges of the

shell. One wriggle by the chelonian, or a push by a classmate, and the chelonian drops like a stone to the floor. Unfortunately, unlike a stone, such a fall, even from apparently "safe" heights, can be enough to severely injure, even kill, the animal. Explain the proper way to hold them. If the child cannot or will not do it, they should not be allowed to hold it. With very young children, it may be best to have them sit in a circle on the floor, with the chelonian placed in the middle of the circle so that the children may pet it, and watch it walk around, but not pick it up.

General Handling Guidelines

Reptiles should be stroked ("petted") in the direction of the scales - from head to tail, not tail to head. With some species, the scales of may be lifted, causing injury to the scales and underlying skin, when they are stroked backwards. Species who have sharply keeled or spiky scales may actually scratch through the person's skin when rubbed the wrong way.

If people start wriggling their fingers like they are trying to get a carnivorous or omnivorous snake's or lizard's attention, ask them what they think their fingers might look like to the animal (correct answer: wriggling baby mice or plump larvae). If that doesn't stop them from doing it, ask them to stop. If that doesn't work, remove the animal from the child's area/reach-or remove the child from the animal's area.

If someone is nervous, making several quick attempts to reach out and touch, resulting in many rapid, forward-and-backward movements, explain that they are communicating their nervousness to the snake or lizard. The reptile may become nervous in turn, ultimately making the reptile more afraid of the person than the person is of the reptile. Explain and demonstrate how to touch, demonstrating the smooth approach that does not frighten the reptile. It often helps to offer a less intimidating part of the animal to pet first (body, tail, leg).

If someone is phobic about reptiles or certain types of reptiles, ask them, in a conversational tone, why they are afraid. Quite often, it is because someone shoved a reptile in their face or down their shirt when they were young, or had a parent who was terrified and instilled their fear into the child. Try to get the person to focus on one particular feature: the eye, the ear, the pattern of scale on one particular place of the body, neck or feet, then move on to another feature. This helps them see the horrible, scary, dangerous reptile as an individual work of art, of nature or, at the very least, something not quite as generically strange as they first thought. At this point the person should be breathing easier and ready to look at the animal as a whole, even to reach out and touch.

Assume nothing! Including assuming that, when a child doesn't want to hold an animal any longer, he or she will give it back to you. Many children, including teenage children who should know better, when tired of holding a snake, lizard, turtle or tortoise, will just drop it and walk away, or just put it down anywhere - under the table, on the ground in the middle of a crowd of people - then walk away. If working with a large group of children, appoint some who are comfortable handling the reptiles to be spotters. Let the other students know that they should give the reptile to the spotters or ask the spotters to take the reptiles when the person holding them no longer wants to do so.

Holding and touching reptiles is a privilege. It should be done with respect, both to the reptile and to other people in the area. Set ground rules for touching, handling, and behavior before allowing such activities to begin. Make it clear that anyone observed holding a reptile up to another person's face in an attempt to scare them will immediately loses touching and holding privileges. Too many people are made afraid of reptiles through such negative encounters and remain afraid for the rest of their lives. Being allowed to touch or hold the reptiles is a privilege that should be granted only to those who do so properly and with the proper respect for the reptiles and people.

Explain the necessity for keeping noise levels down. Lizards and chelonians have ears, and even snakes can pick up and react to air- and surface-borne sound waves. Lots of noise and commotion can make even a tame reptile nervous.

If the temperatures get too warm (and anything over 88-90 can be too warm for most of the reptiles, including the desert animals who, after all, spend the hottest parts of the day underground), spray them regularly with water, and make sure each enclosure has a cool retreat area.

Make sure all animals are handed back to you or the spotters, or, if appropriate, allow the child to place the

animal back in the enclosure.

After cleaning, touching, and handling sessions, always do a head count to make sure that the right animals have been put back in their own enclosures, that all animals are accounted for, and that all enclosures are securely closed and locked. Head counts and enclosure security should be done at the start of every day, before and after lunch, and at the end of the day.

The primary focus of any encounter is education through exposure to information augmented by contact with live animals. The animals should not be put at risk, nor should you or the students.

Do not handle wild-caught animals who are going to be released back into the wild any more than it absolutely necessary to monitor health, show briefly to students, and to clean its enclosure.

When Bites Happen

There is actually a third certainty in life. Besides death and taxes, the one other thing you can be certain of is that, if you work with animals, sooner or later you are going to get bitten.

How bad the bite is, and how bad it is perceived to be, often depends on:

- how unprepared you are for the bite
- how you react to it
- how you get the reptile to let go
- how you handle the reptile during and immediately after the bite

If the bite happens in front of students, how you handle yourself and the animal becomes even more important as the students will learn from you how to act if they get bitten.

Strikes

Most bites are strikes - open mouth hits on your hand or arm. These are warnings or commentary ("I'm hungry and would like to be fed now." "I am not happy about this at all.") Once they've had their "say," they withdraw and either stare at you, stare off into another direction, or try to get back to their enclosure or away from you. If they are already in their enclosure, they may relax, or move away from you, or remain in an S-coil, watching and waiting to see what you are going to do next. At most, you will get a series of punctures from the teeth (which may be numerous and, in the case of snakes, there may be two rows on the top and bottom jaws). Depending on the size of the snake and how hard they hit you, there may or may not be a little bleeding. If a large snake hits you, there may be more bruising and soreness than actual wounding.

Feeding Bite

Feeding bites are very different. Here, the reptile grabs and holds on. If you try to pull away from the reptile while its teeth are still sunk into you, you will lose the tug of war. And some skin. And, depending on the type of animal it is, the amount of jaw pressure and type of teeth they have, more than a little blood, and possibly, nerves and tendons. With snakes, the more you squirm or pull, the harder they are going to hold on to you and try to "kill" your arm or hand by coiling around whatever they can reach and constricting their struggling "prey." While they may know, at some level, that your hand or arm is not a nice, juicy rodent or rabbit, by that time the feeding instinct has taken over, and they will continue until they finally realize that you are in fact not edible or you otherwise convince them to let go. For safety's sake, and the sake of expediency (unless you really like getting gnawed and drooled on for what may be a prolonged period of time), it is best to convince rather than wait for the reptile to detach itself in its own time.

To some very hungry, small carnivorous lizards and snakes, our fingers, even our knuckles, may look all too similar to furless pinkie mice or featherless baby birds. If our hands smell like rodents, birds, or even other reptiles (remember: many carnivorous reptiles, especially snakes, eat other reptiles), a small snake or lizard may decide to start trying to eat your hand or a part of it. Your hand, being ever so much bigger than even a moderately sized snake can possibly swallow, is in no danger. The snake is, however, depending upon how you react.

Okay. So you have a monitor or snake or some such thing clamped to your arm or hand. How do you convince them that you aren't on the menu? Pour a few drops of vinegar into their mouths. Alcohol (the

drinking kind, not the rubbing kind) works best, but may not be legal to keep in your classroom. You should first turn the reptile so that it is facing the floor so that the fluid does not run into their glottis, the opening into their lung. After all, you just want to get them to let go, not drown them or give them a respiratory infection!

A possible alternative are those little foil packets of ammonia-saturated fabric that have taken the place of old fashioned smelling salts bottles and capsules in emergency medical kits. You may be able to buy a box of these at medical supply stores. At no time should ammonia be allowed to come into contact with any reptile. All you need to do is wave the ammonia swab in front of their face, an inch or so away. The fumes will get them to release as they try to back away from it. If you are unsure whether you or your students will be able to keep the ammonia swab from coming into direct contact with the reptile, then it is best to use the vinegar or alcohol.

Do not fling the reptile off of you once they let go. They weren't being vicious or nasty (well, not unless you are feeding a tree boa, anaconda, gold tegu, or Nile monitor..!). They were just reacting the way they instinctively do when they are faced with food or what they think is food. Once the reptile has disengaged its teeth from your flesh, put it back into its enclosure, secure it, and then tend to your wounds.

Screaming and yelling at a reptile, especially a snake, doesn't do a thing. It won't convince them to let go (I know, I've tried) and just serves to raise your blood pressure and the blood pressure and panic levels of anyone witnessing the event. The calmer you make yourself feel and act, the calmer you will feel and act, thus setting an example for, and reducing the panic level of, your observers, as well.

After a bite happens, take some time to discuss with your students what happened, and why it happened. Discuss the observed behaviors, triggers, and what can be done in the future to prevent the same outcome.

Minimize the Risk

The best thing, of course, is to minimize the risk of ever getting bitten. You can do this by learning to read your reptiles. Reptiles, like all animals, are good communicators, once you learn their language. The top four reasons why you are likely to get bitten are:

4. You frighten them, such as by moving unexpectedly and quickly in a way that makes them feel threatened. Keep in mind that many reptiles are themselves preyed upon by larger animals, including predatory birds.
3. You startle them, as in waking them up suddenly when they are sound asleep. Some very socialized snakes will sleep through your approach and opening up their enclosure door, not waking until you actually touch them. If you have ever startled a sleeping dog or cat, and had them react by growling, jerking up, and baring their teeth or lashing out with claws extended, you have a pretty good idea of what a snake or lizard may do.
2. You mess with them when they are getting ready to shed, and fail to back off even after getting lots of warning huffing and puffing and hissing. A cranky snake gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "hissy fit." Respect it and you won't get bit.
1. You smell like their food. This is the number one reason why people are bitten by their snakes and monitors. Bites often seriously enough to require plastic and microsurgery, if not actually death by large constrictor. Feeding bites are nothing but an illustration of how stupid or unthinking a reptile keeper can be. If you don't smell like prey, and if the room doesn't smell like prey, you will not get chomped on by a hungry reptile who is convinced that you are prey.

Do not keep mice or rats in the same room as rodent eaters. That's like keeping a triple-layer chocolate fudge cake with hot fudge sauce in front of hungry chocolaholic and telling them they have to wait till later to eat. With the minor exception that the cake doesn't know that it is food; rodents do, and they can smell the snakes and lizards just as easily as the reptiles can smell them.

Use tongs or hemostats to feed even the tamest of lizards or snakes. When it comes to feeding time, it doesn't really matter what your usual relationship is. Instinct takes over and you are merely a delivery system. Even when using tongs or hemostats, if you've been handling prey (and remember that, to a snake or lizard

that eats snakes and lizards, other snakes and lizards smell like prey), wash your hands with hot soapy water before feeding your reptiles.

If you are feeding nocturnal snakes or lizards who, like ball pythons, have poor visual acuity, rinse your hands under cold water right before offering them food. Otherwise, they will go for the warmest thing moving around in front of them...your hand, not that dangling room-temperature mouse. In the case of snakes who rely on heat detection to zero in on prey, you want the mouse to be warmer than your hand (which you can accomplish by gently warming the prey in warm water or rinsing your hands in cold right before feeding).

Carnivorous lizard bites are a slightly different story, especially from large lizards such as tegus and monitors. These lizards crush their prey's skull in their powerful jaws and apparently try to tenderize them by banging them on the ground and against the walls of their enclosure. Needless to say, this can be an uncomfortable situation when it is your fingers or hand that they are trying to tenderize and kill. The best way to avoid this is to always use tongs and, for large monitors and tegus, have a spotter if the lizard is overly enthusiastic about eating.

The green iguana is no slouch in the teeth department either. (Picture, if you will, a deeply serrated bread knife, bent in a V-shape with the cutting edge facing out, and you have a good approximation of the cutting surface of each of the iguana's 116-120 teeth.) Iguanas will communicate when they are thinking about, or going to be, biting. Learn to read them and learn how to mitigate their behaviors. The tamer an iguana is, the less likely it is going to bite (except some males during breeding season), so avoiding bites is a great reason why you should not put off working with that iguana any longer!

In closing, snake bites, unless they are feeding bites from very large boas or pythons (or you do something stupid like one local reptile educator did: he put a hissy python's head in his mouth, whereupon the snake chomped down on his tongue and would not let go), the vast majority of bites are really less painful and damaging than your fears and anticipation make them. The scariest thing about being bitten is anticipating the bite, worrying about what it is going to feel like. Bites from most colubrids (kings, corns, gophers, etc.) and small lizards are no more painful or debilitating than a bad paper cut.

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