

# Are Cows Inherently Bad Mothers? Debunking Dairy Industry Myths

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*Challenging the prevailing narrative requires us to acknowledge the inherent maternal instincts of cows and consider the ethical implications of an industry built on their exploitation.*



Cow and Calf, [human.cruelties, flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/humancruelties/)

**In the heart of dairy farming lies a paradox: the revered symbol of motherhood, the cow, is cast as both nurturer and neglecter. How can this be?**

In this blog post, we delve into the ‘bad mother’ propaganda perpetuated by many farmers on social media. We explore why this narrative exists, examining research papers and the true nature of cows. Additionally, we present real-life examples from animal sanctuaries and trending, ‘calf-on-foot’ dairies that challenge this conventional wisdom by keeping calves with their mothers.

## **The Dairy Industry and the ‘Bad Mother’ Narrative**

In commercial dairy farms, the practice of separating calves from their mothers shortly after birth is standard. These farms argue that cows used for dairy are not inherently maternal, and the separation is necessary for several reasons. “We don’t like to take any chances,” explains Nyfarmgirls, “so we get the baby to safety as soon as she licks it off.” They assert that this practice helps build the calf’s immune system and ensures its well-being. (1)

## Screenshot from Facebook



A screenshot of a Facebook post from the page 'Nyfarmgirls', dated April 10, 2022. The post discusses the practice of separating calves from their mothers on dairy farms. It includes a list of reasons, starting with '1. Dairy cows are NOT super motherly. The trait has been bred out of them. We w... See more'. The post has 1.1K likes, 99 comments, and 490 shares. Below the post, there are two comments: one from Kitty Cochran DeBock asking about male calves, and one from Michele O'Donnell asking why beef cattle farms keep babies with mothers for up to 7 months.

**Nyfarmgirls**  
April 10, 2022 · 🌐

We separate the babies from the mother.

In fact, most dairy farms do. There must be a reason we all do this right? Right. It is easy to think of cows and calves like the fairy tale animals in a Disney movie. The act of taking the calf away from the mother really strikes a nerve with many consumers. We do not do this because we are evil farmers, just the opposite actually. Let me me explain why.

1. Dairy cows are NOT super motherly. The trait has been bred out of them. We w... **See more**

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Most relevant ▾

**Kitty Cochran DeBock**  
Curious, what do you do with the male calves?  
2y Like Reply 2 👍

**Nyfarmgirls** replied · 11 Replies

**Michele O'Donnell**  
Why do beef cattle farms keep the babies with the moms for up to 7 months? Isn't the mothers colostrum better? I know the mortality rate is horrible for the babies and it's necessary to intervene when they go down. But I know a beef farmer who rarely ...  
**See more**



Workers on such operations often contend that cows don't share the same kind of maternal love as humans do, and that separating them is essential for the safety of both the cow and the calf. "Some cows aren't great mothers," reflects Jennifer from *Heim Dairy Farm*, a dairy northwest of Kansas City. "They might not even clean off their own calf before we separate them, and once out of sight, most don't give a second thought to their calf's well-being." (2)

But, if cows were truly incapable of nurturing their young, one might question the survival of the species. This paradox prompts a closer examination of the natural behavior of the cow outside the farm context.

### **Are Cows Naturally 'Bad Mothers'?**

As mammals, it lies in the cows' nature to care for their offspring, as their survival and growth are greatly dependent on a robust mother-offspring relationship.

Cows have intricate behavior patterns during late pregnancy, parturition, and lactation. Their nine-month-long pregnancy, similar to that of humans, gives them plenty of time to bond with their offspring before they're born and allows their motherly behavior to kick in full force.

A caring mother cow who lost her baby to the dairy industry, helps friend to protect her newborn calf.  
Source: Kinder World

Once the calf arrives, the cow's maternal instinct takes over, driving her to provide unwavering protection from predators and environmental dangers. Moreover, dams display remarkable teaching behaviors aimed at fostering independence in their young. Through gentle nudges, vocalizations, and patient demonstrations, mothers guide their calves in acquiring essential survival skills, such as foraging for food and navigating hazards. (3)

However, despite cows' inherent maternal instincts, the environment in which they are raised can profoundly affect their ability to express these instincts fully. This raises the question: which came first, the poor mothers or the farming practices that engender them? It is a chicken-and-egg scenario where we must examine whether cows' perceived shortcomings as mothers are a result of innate traits or the consequences of modern dairy farming practices.

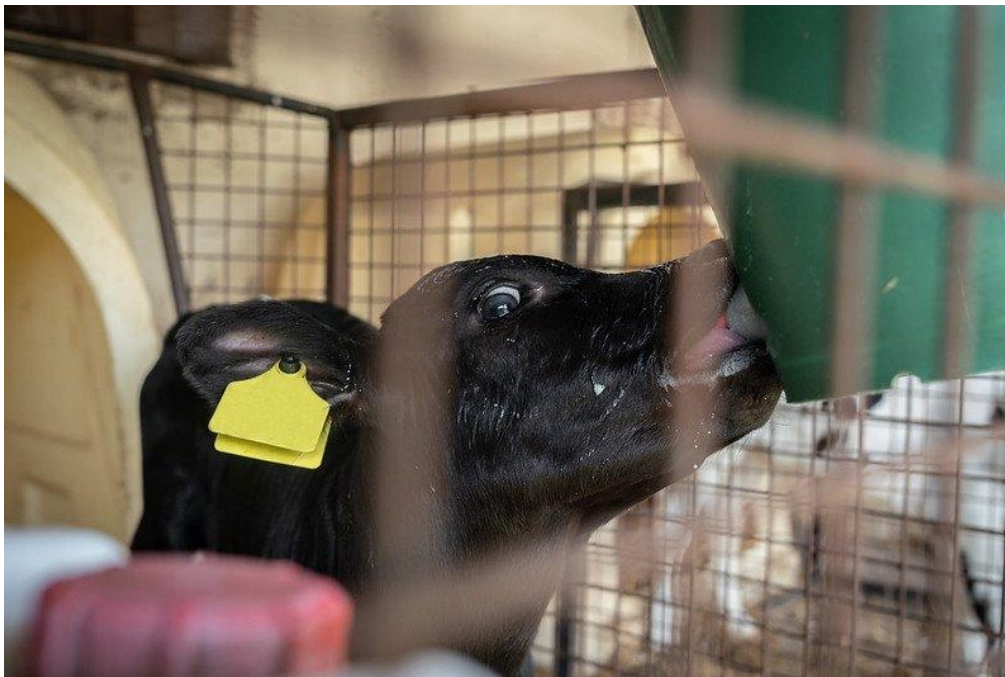
### **Does Dairy Farming Impact Maternal Behavior?**

Modern dairy farms are structured to optimize efficiency and productivity, often resulting in an environment that diverges significantly from the natural habitat of cows. Within these industrialized settings, the complexities of maternal behavior in cows face numerous challenges. The design and practices of commercial dairy farming surely influence the maternal instincts and behaviors of cows, shaping their experiences and interactions in ways that may conflict with their natural inclinations.

The setting and operations of commercial dairy farms have the strongest impact on the cow, including housing and herd management, breeding of cows, and continuous separation of dams and their babies.

In the intensive housing systems of commercial dairy farms, cows typically struggle to exhibit their natural maternal behaviors due to large herd sizes and overall crowded conditions. Social dynamics within the herd further disrupt maternal care, with cows feeling stressed or intimidated, impacting their ability to properly mother their calves. Additionally, the risk of aggression from other cows during calving can lead to further complications. (4)

Breeding practices also play a significant role in shaping maternal behavior. While maternal aggression is crucial for calf survival, selective breeding for a calmer temperament and higher milk production may inadvertently diminish this maternal instinct. This can result in cows that are less attentive to their offspring's needs, further perpetuating the idea of "bad mothers." (5)



*Calf eating formul, [human.cruelties, flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/human.cruelties/)*



*Milking machine.* [human.cruelties, flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/human.cruelties/)

Moreover, the premature separation of calves from their mothers deprives both cow and calf of vital bonding time. Calves are typically removed from their dams within the first 24 hours after birth and housed individually until weaning. This separation disrupts the natural process of maternal bonding and can lead to distress both for the cow and calf.

Additionally, most heifers were never raised by their mothers themselves and lack the experience and observation of motherly behavior. This lack of maternal guidance can further contribute to the challenges faced by cows in expressing their natural maternal instincts in commercial dairy farming environments.

Considering the unnatural living conditions imposed on cows, both physically and socially, it's hardly surprising that workers on dairy farms frequently observe inappropriate behavior from mother cows after giving birth. However, attributing the blame solely to their inherent nature or incapacity without acknowledging the role of farming practices is unjust. Such a narrative presents consumers with distorted images of cows and their mothering instincts. To further substantiate our critique of commercial farm settings and practices, we'll now turn our attention to animals experiencing motherhood in so-called 'ethical dairies' and sanctuaries, where the mother-calf pair is not separated.

### **The Dairy Industry and the 'Good Mother' Narrative**

Sanctuaries and 'calf-on-foot' farms offer contrasting perspectives on the maternal instincts and capabilities of cows used for dairy. Sanctuaries, which rescue animals from the farming industry, advocate for allowing mother cows to nurture their calves, emphasizing the importance of the mother-offspring bond for the well-being of both animals. They believe that cows are highly devoted mothers and that separating them from their calves causes trauma. "The mamas often hide their babies as they are afraid the calf will be taken," shares a commenter from Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary. (6)

However, skeptics may argue that sanctuaries could be biased and may not report all fatalities or instances accurately.

To avoid biased and one-sided facts, let's take a look at an emerging trend in the dairy industry that presents a counterargument to the common narrative. Known as 'calf-on-foot', this form of dairy farming emphasizes reuniting calves with their mothers or fostering them, aiming to portray a more humane image. One farmer notes, "We now have around 60 cows in our milking herd who have spent their whole lives in a cow-with-calf dairy where they are able to express natural behavior and enjoy natural maternal bonds." This acknowledgment from farmers underscores the innate maternal instincts of cows and suggests that it requires a system where animals can experience and safely express their instincts. (7)

However, it's important to recognize that labeling these farms as 'ethical' is misleading. As the farmer himself admits, "We are not a slaughter-free dairy and we do not pretend to be. [...] Eventually, the cows and the bull calves will enter the food chain for meat." (8) This brings to light the inherent ethical concerns of all forms of dairy farming, as they ultimately exploit the reproductive and maternal capacities of cows for human gain, regardless of the farming practices employed. Tom Regan, a prominent animal rights philosopher, argued that the inherent value of animals means they should not be treated as mere commodities, regardless of how 'humanely' they are raised. Thus, 'calf-on-foot' farms still fall short of meeting the ethical standards of true animal liberation.



*Confined Cows, [human.cruelties, flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/human.cruelties/)*



Newborn Calves, [human.cruelties, flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/human.cruelties/)

### **What Is Milk If Not the Liquified Essence of Motherhood? A Conclusion.**

Milk, often hailed as nature's perfect food, is the liquid embodiment of motherhood—a testament to the nurturing bond between mother and offspring. However, the dairy industry exploits this innate capacity to reduce cows to mere commodities in the pursuit of profit. Beyond economics, imagine the anguish of a mother cow as her calf is forcibly taken away, her maternal instincts thwarted by human intervention. This emotional turmoil is the hidden cost of our insatiable demand for dairy products—a cost borne by countless mother cows and their calves.

Challenging the prevailing narrative requires us to acknowledge the inherent maternal instincts of cows and consider the ethical implications of an industry built on their exploitation.

Sanctuaries and 'calf-on-foot' challenge the conventional 'bad mother' narrative, showcasing the innate maternal instincts of cows. Recognizing the inherent ethical concerns of all forms of dairy farming, which ultimately exploit the reproductive and maternal capacities of cows for human utility, we can instead look to animal sanctuaries as models of compassion. This calls for a move towards a dairy-free lifestyle, where we honour the bond between mother and offspring without exploitation.

### **Sources**

(1) Nyfarmgirls “We separate the babies from the mother.”  
<https://www.facebook.com/Nyfarmgirls12/photos/a.294208134624586/945452886166771/?type=3>

(2) Heim Dairy “Calf Care Part 1: Why do dairy farmers separate calves from their mothers?”  
<https://heimdairy.com/2014/01/14/why-dairy-farmers-separate-cows-and-calves/>

(3) “Prepartum Maternal Behavior of Domesticated Cattle: A Comparison with Managed, Feral, and Wild Ungulates”