



Early Rearing Environment

A supportive environment during the first 3 weeks of life is important for normal puppy development.

At birth, the puppy's brain, spinal cord, and nerves are not fully developed. The early weeks are a period of rapid change, both physically and behaviorally.

NEONATAL PERIOD (0 – 13 DAYS)

- Puppies are sensitive to touch, temperature, certain tastes (milk), and smells (mother and littermates).
- Hearing, sight, and motor skills are still developing.
- Behavior consists mainly of suckling, sleeping, and seeking care from the mother.
- Learning is limited to simple associations with touch, taste, or smell.

TRANSITION PERIOD (~ 13 – 18 DAYS)

- The eyes and ears open, and the puppy begins to see and hear better.
- Behavior changes quickly. The puppy starts to:
 - crawl backwards, stand, and walk
 - eliminate outside of the whelping box
 - show interest in solid food
 - play with littermates and display social signals (tail wag, growl)
- Puppies' learning ability improves to include tasks that are more complex such as observational learning by watching others, especially their mother.



DID YOU KNOW?

Brief separations from their mother and gentle handling are good for puppies. These experiences produce positive changes in how puppies respond to stress throughout their lives. This may be due to an increase in maternal care (licking, nursing) when the puppy is reunited with her.

How Can I Improve the Early Rearing Environment?

Gently handle young puppies for short periods each day. Monitor children's interaction with puppies to ensure the handling is gentle, positive, and of short duration (a few minutes at a time). Reduce maternal stress; the less she experiences, the better she will be able to care for her puppies.



PRACTICAL TIP



Handling puppies daily is a good way to monitor their health, provide prompt veterinary care when necessary, and begin to socialize them.

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to provide information about behavioral development in dogs. Refer to the other topics in the series for more information on socialization and maternal stress.

Questions? Email us at CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov

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