

YOUR FIRST LITTER WEANING AND RAISING PUPPIES

by Linda Hazen Lewin

So, your bitch has whelped a fine litter of puppies and they're just about ready to be weaned. What happens now? What do you feed them? How do you keep them healthy? How do you raise them to be outgoing, happy puppies who will fit into their eventual new homes? The following are some tips for raising a super litter.

How to Wean Puppies from Their Dam (and Wean the Dam from her Puppies)

Much of your involvement with weaning must be guided by your bitch's behavior. Some bitches just naturally jump out of the whelping box when the puppies reach the age of 4 weeks or so (when they have those needle-sharp milk teeth) and never look back. Other bitches would happily nurse their puppies until they all died of old age! If your bitch is one of the former, you need only to be ready to step in and replace Mom with some puppy food and your blender. If she is one of the latter, you will have to make the effort yourself to keep her away from the puppies for longer and longer periods of time so her milk will dry up. Nursing promotes the production of more milk; the longer she nurses, the longer it will take to get her back to normal condition.

With a bitch who is reluctant to turn over the reins, let her in to visit the puppies three or four times a day, OR let her stay with them through the night (not both). Keep her away from them the rest of the time. Cut back on visiting hours and frequency over the course of 2 weeks, so that finally she is not nursing them at all. In no case should a bitch be nursing after the puppies are 5 weeks old (although they will still climb all over her when they see her!). During the weaning period, cut the bitch's food back to her non-pregnant amount as well, even if she looks skinny. Huge amounts of food, which she now doesn't need, will encourage milk production. After her teats have returned to close-to-normal, you can increase her food again to restore her normal weight.

Start weaning the pups at about 3 weeks of age, or as soon as they can stand fairly steadily on their legs. I have great success with commercial dry puppy foods such as Purina Puppy Chow or Pedigree for Puppies. I don't generally recommend a premium brand puppy food, as they tend to be too "loaded" for puppies (despite how they're marketed) and can result in growth problems. You can, however, raise puppies well on premium brand adult foods. Whatever works for you.

For your first few tries at feeding, put a handful into a blender with enough hot water to make the food start to float. Puree it thoroughly, to make a sort of gruel. Add more hot water if necessary, so it is fairly thin. Remember, baby pups just have milk teeth and are learning the transition between sucking and lapping. They can't really chew yet, and you don't want them to choke. Pour the gruel into a shallow pan or cookie sheet, and place it in the middle of the whelping box. Move the puppies to the edge of the pan, or even into it and let them explore.

The first few feedings are truly funny, as the puppies figure out how to eat. Most of the initial feedings consist of the puppies sliding around in the pan, falling down in it and licking each other off (which is how they discover that it tastes good). Let them wallow in it -- what they don't lick off each other the bitch will clean up at visiting time. For those pups who show no interest, put a dab of food on your finger, gently pry their little mouths open and put the food on the end of their tongue (or on their nose). They will sneeze and choke and act completely put out, but after the second or third feeding they will eagerly waddle over to the pan. Don't let your bitch in with them while you feed, as the puppies will leave the food and go to the "milk bar". Also, she is likely to eat the puppy food!

Feed the puppies as much as they will eat three or four times a day. (I feed mine in the morning before work, in the evening when I return from work, and late at night before bed). Make more food as they start to clean the pan, to make sure they are getting enough, and let Mom in with them either only at night or only two or three times a day. You want her milk to dry up and you want the puppies to be getting most of their sustenance from the food, not from her. As the puppies get older, you can use less water in the blender and make the food thicker and chewier.

Changes to the Whelping Box Environment

As the puppies grow, become more physically capable, and see Mom less, you will want to put a pad or sheet at one end of the whelping box to form the nest once made by the bitch. The reason for this is to reinforce the "denning instinct" in the puppies' minds, which helps immensely with housebreaking. Dogs are instinctively clean animals and do not wish to soil their den. The puppies will naturally cluster together in their nest when they are sleepy, but will leave it and go to the other end of the box when they need to urinate and defecate. By providing a defined nest, you are reinforcing the idea of keeping the nest clean, and using newspaper for "other things". Of course, there will be mistakes and the nest will have to be washed fairly often at first, but they will eventually get the idea! When they go to their new homes, this early imprinting translates into full-fledged housebreaking.

As the puppies start to eat real food instead of milk, the bitch will no longer clean up after them. Guess what -- it's your turn! Have tons of newspaper on hand, lots of paper towels or tissues for small pick-ups, and a nice, big trash can. You'll need them. (Now is the time you will be grateful that you put so much newspaper in the box before whelping. At clean-up time, you should only have to remove the top few layers of newspaper, rather than have to clean out and repaper the entire box). It is helpful to have an exercise pen or another confined area in which to put the puppies while you clean out the whelping box. It is very difficult to do with the puppies in there, as they climb all over you while you're trying to clean up. Puppies always eliminate right after eating and after waking up from a nap, so be prepared for major clean-ups when you get up in the morning and right after you feed them. With young babies, it's almost constant, so grit your teeth and dig in!

When the puppies are between 4 and 5 weeks old, they will be exploring the furthest reaches of the whelping box. You should then provide them with some simple toys. Like human babies, exposure to weird and wonderful things is important for brain development. A tennis ball is good because it is light and easily rolled. Puppies also adore cardboard paper towel rolls (which you should have plenty of!) or toilet paper rolls because they can pick them up and carry them. When they are chewed up, just throw them away. Another good toy for bigger pups is an empty plastic milk carton. These can be carried, pounced on, stood on top of and tussled over. A soft latex toy with a squeaker in it is also good for young puppies (the first time they actually make it squeak is a riot) but keep a close eye on the condition of it so that the puppies don't chew the squeaker out of it. Also, keep an eye on your bitch so she doesn't swipe all the toys from the puppies -- she could be very jealous of them and all the nifty stuff they're getting to play with. If she becomes gruff with them or keeps trying to horn in on the fun, give her one of her own toys and give her some undivided attention. After all, she's the reason those puppies are there in the first place!

Between 4 and 5 weeks of age, it is usually safe to put a water bowl in the whelping box with the puppies. Make sure it is heavy enough that they can't tip it over, and high enough on the sides so they can't fall into it accidentally and drown. As you start to make the puppies' food thicker and they visit with Mom less, they will need water. Let them discover it on their own; they'll go to it when they need it.

Socialization

Puppies at the weaning age are beginning to relate to their outside environment and this is the stage when they need lots of human interaction, mental stimulation and exposure to new sights and sounds. Take your shoes off and get right in the whelping box with them (after you clean it, of course!). Pick them up, cuddle them, talk to them and let them climb on you. Roll the ball for them and hold a paper towel roll so they can tug on it. Observe their behavior carefully and give extra attention to any that seem reserved, frightened or disinterested. Early behavior modification begins now! I play a radio in the room with the whelping box and put it on a different station every day. My puppies have heard DJs, CNN, and music from rock to Bach by the time they are 6 weeks old. The radio teaches them not to be afraid of funny noises and to recognize the different timbres of the human voice.

Take the puppies out of the whelping box frequently and let them explore the room, talking to them all the while. Observe who is bold and curious and who is reticent. Don't baby the cautious ones, but rather, encourage them to venture away. Roll the ball across the floor away from you and encourage them to follow it. If a puppy is crouching next to you, get up and walk a little way away and call it to you. When it comes to you, praise profusely, and then walk away again. Soon, it will toddle around on its own and play with the others.

If you have a separate exercise pen, set it up somewhere where there is lots of family traffic and put the pups in the pen frequently. Kitchens are great because sounds tend to echo off of the floor, the oven and refrigerator doors are banging, and the family congregates there. And all of that is overlaid with terrific smells! If the weather is warm, you can also set the pen up out in your yard and expose them to outdoor sights and sounds. Remember, all these new experiences will be something of a shock the first time, so spend time with the pups, talking to them and encouraging them. The more you and the family interact with the puppies at a young age, the better adjusted they will be. You want to send pups to their new homes confident and secure. An 8-week-old pup is the equivalent of a 2- or 3-year-old child, and you wouldn't think of having a child that age who had never seen a kitchen, a staircase or the great outdoors, right? Socialization is the key.

Health Issues

Until the puppies have had their first shots, they should not leave your house or be exposed to outsiders. Your vet can advise you about when to give shots. I usually give a parvovirus shot first (at 7 weeks of age), since parvo is the most virulent and contagious thing puppies can get. I give a distemper/hepatitis/leptospirosis/parainfluenza ("DHLP") shot at 8 weeks. Then another parvo shot at 11 weeks and another DHLP at 12 weeks. Then they are ready to go to their new homes. I do not like to give the parvo shot with the DHLP (a "galaxy" shot), because sometimes all that vaccine at one time will make them woozy. Keep records of what shots the puppies have had and when, so the new owners have something to show their vet when they take their puppies home.

Puppies often need to be wormed, and should be checked for worms some time around their 4th week even if you think they don't have any. Your vet can advise you as to treatment. I use Nemex-2 on my puppies, as it is palatable and does a good job without being too harsh on young systems. Add the information about any worming you do to the records you provide to new owners.

Another maintenance item is cutting toenails. Puppy toenails are very sharp and grow very fast, so you need to cut them once a week while you have the litter at home (and advise the new owners to keep up this regimen!). Puppy toenails are easily cut with human toenail clippers. Have a helper hold the puppy against their chest with one hand under the puppy's bottom and the other holding the chest, with

the feet sticking out toward you. Grasp each paw gently and cut off the hooked part of the nail. It goes very fast with two people and must be done religiously so the puppies can walk properly.

Finally, if the parents of your litter have not been DNA-tested for von Willebrand's Disease, or, they have been tested and one or both of them is a Carrier, you must get your entire litter tested. VetGen provides the swabs and the labs for vWD testing, and you may order the test packets from them by phone or via their Internet web site. When you receive the test results back from VetGen, you should copy them and include the test results in the packets of information you provide the new owners.

Of course, if the parents of your litter have been tested and are both Clear for vWD, your puppies are now considered "Clear by Parentage". However, you should make copies of the parents' test results so as to prove the puppies' status to the new owners.

Paper Work

I have already mentioned the records you will want to keep regarding the dates and products used for shots and worming. Each new owner should receive a copy of these records plus a copy of the puppy's von Willebrand's Disease test results.

In addition to the above, most breeders use a sales contract of some sort. This contract stipulates the conditions under which the dog is sold as regards price, breeding or spay/neuter agreements, showing contracts, co-ownerships, and conditions of resale or placement of the dog. This is where you can spell out clearly that a pet-quality puppy is to be spayed or neutered, or the conditions under which a show puppy is to be exhibited and/or bred. All of these stipulations are up to you as the breeder, so write the contract the way you want it. Two copies should be available at the time of sale so that you have a copy and the new owner has a copy, signed by both of you.

Finally, you will need to provide each new owner with a copy of the puppy's pedigree, and an AKC registration form. These will be sent to you when you register your litter with AKC, which can be done as soon as the puppies are born and you know how many you have of each sex. On each puppy's registration form, you, as the breeder, are given the option of selling the puppy on a full or a limited registration. Full registration means that as far as the AKC is concerned (aside from your own sales contract) the new owner can show in conformation shows and can breed his new dog. It is fully registered, and puppies resulting from that dog's being bred are registerable as well. Limited registration means that the dog cannot be shown in conformation, and if the dog is bred, the AKC will not register the puppies. (The dog can be shown in obedience, tracking, agility or any other AKC activity except conformation.) Choosing limited registration can be a good precaution to take in selling pet-quality puppies which you do not want to see bred in the future, supplemental to your own spay/neuter contract. You, as the breeder, make this decision so you have control.

To sum up, the new owner should go home with his or her new puppy PLUS: Shots & worming records

VetGen vWD test printout
Sales contract
5-generation pedigree
AKC registration form

You end up with (presumably) some money and a little less to feed and clean up behind!

The Empty Nest

If you are like most people, you will have mixed feelings as each puppy goes out the door. There's always a little tug at your heart as you see that little face in the window of a stranger's car, but there is also vast relief that you don't have to face the blender or that icky whelping box again! Of course, if you've decided to keep a puppy, you still have miles to go before you sleep but at least it's just one rather than 4, 6, or 8. You should dismantle the whelping box (if you are using a re-usable one), scrub each piece thoroughly with Clorox and, if possible, let it sun-dry.

You have probably noticed that your bitch is losing coat and looks like the Wrath of God. Some bitches lose coat right down to the skin, looking gray and tan rather than black and tan. As her new coat grows in, she will even feel sort of prickly. This is a normal accompaniment to her hormones winding down from pregnancy and lactation. Grit your teeth and cuddle her anyway; in a few weeks her coat will be back in full bloom, and will probably look better than ever because it's all new hair. She can go back to a completely normal exercise regimen at this point, and exercise will help get her back in shape quickly.

Follow up with your puppies' new owners in two or three weeks to see how they're doing or if they have any questions. Always offer to help with problems, and if something is absolutely untenable, offer to take the puppy back. It seems to give people a psychological "out" if they think you are always willing to take a dog back, and they work harder at whatever the problem is. I always tell people that I will take a dog back for any reason at any time during the life of the dog. In 30 years, I have only gotten one back and that was because the owners' vet mistakenly diagnosed the puppy with a heart murmur, which frightened the people. I took her back, had my vet confirm that she did not have a heart murmur, and within a week, she was in another new home! I have successfully placed dogs of all ages with wonderful people, and puppies always have great appeal. If you make it clear that you are available, people will try to make it work.

And now, the puppies are gone, the whelping box is cleaned and put away, and your bitch is out in the yard playing with the kids. What are you doing? Heaving a sigh of relief and making an appointment to have your bitch spayed? Or standing in your doorway, reviewing the litter in your mind and gazing at your bitch with narrowed eyes -- thinking about puppies -- thinking about stud dogs -- figuring on the calendar when she will next be breedable -- ????????