

RAISING ORPHAN PUPPIES

Raising orphan puppies can be a very rewarding job but is also extremely time consuming. Without a canine Mom, the foster parents are responsible for providing for all the pups' needs: feeding, warmth, cleaning, socialization, and stimulation to eliminate. For puppies less than a month old all this requires at least a half an hour every 2 to 3 hours round the clock. During the first several weeks we recommend splitting up the care between several adults so that it doesn't become overwhelming.

Puppies less than a month old should be set up in a small area (crate or large box with bedding) that can be kept consistently warm (80-98 degrees). The puppies will curl up together to keep warm but still need warm blankets and hot water bottles since they can't regulate their body temperature on their own at this age. Do not use heating pads—these can be extremely dangerous. As the puppies grow and become more mobile their living quarters should be expanded slowly. The area should be warm, draft free, and easily cleaned. A small bathroom or laundry room often works well. “Baby proof” any area the puppies are in. Look for hazards such as exposed cords, open toilet bowls, small spaces where puppies could get stuck, or toxic items they could chew on. Puppies less than 8 weeks old should only go outside during warm weather for short periods with adult supervision. Do not allow other dogs to be around the puppies without constant adult supervision. Adult dogs may view newborn puppies as prey and may attack or even kill the puppies without warning.

Puppy milk replacer should be mixed and fed according to the package instructions for newborns. At first, puppies need to be fed every two to three hours round the clock. By the time the puppies are 3 to 4 weeks of age, they can be fed every 4 to 5 hours during the day and go 6 to 8 hours at night without eating. Try to not hold puppies on their backs for feedings, as this can predispose them to aspirating the formula into their lungs. If the puppies are not sucking well on their own, they may need to be tube fed. Contact the clinic for lessons on how to tube feed if this seems necessary. After each feeding, stimulate urination and defecation by gently rubbing the ano-genital region with a warm damp cotton ball or washcloth. Use a clean warm washcloth to gently wash the puppies' faces after feeding.

By 3 weeks of age the puppies can slowly begin being weaned. Start by offering formula in a low dish for the puppies to lick at just before bottle feeding so that they will be hungry and more likely to try eating on their own. Gradually start adding canned puppy food to the formula. Continue bottle feeding until all the puppies are consistently eating well from the dish. By 4 to 5 weeks the puppies should be ready to start eating some dry kibble that has been soaked in formula or water and mixed with canned food. Offer food at least four times a day. At this point bottle feeding is usually not necessary. Continue offering soaked dry kibble until 7 or 8 weeks of age but gradually use less and less liquid to start preparing them to eat plain dry puppy kibble. Puppies who are learning to eat solid food are very messy eaters. Be prepared to wash off the puppies with a warm wet washcloth after each feeding.

Over 80% of puppies are infected with round worms at birth (they are infected in utero by encysted larva present in the mother's tissues.) All puppies should be dewormed every 10 to 14 days starting at 2 weeks of age. The first vaccines are usually given at 6 weeks of age and then repeated again at 8, 12, and 16 weeks of age. Generally, puppies are ready to be separated from their littermates and go to new homes at about 8 weeks of age.

Orphan puppies need lots of socialization with both humans and other animals in order to develop into good family pets. Gentle holding, petting, and talking to the pups should be done daily. Exposure to a variety of people and noises is desirable. See the accompanying pages on puppy development for further suggestions.

Unfortunately, the mortality rate among orphan puppies is often high. While formula can provide all the necessary nutrients for growth, it does not provide the same protective antibodies that are present in the mother's milk. This means that bottle fed puppies are much more susceptible to infectious disease. An apparently healthy puppy can become ill and die in less than 24 hours. Newborn puppies should be monitored very closely for any signs of diarrhea, vomiting, lethargy, eye or skin infections, coughing, or trouble breathing. Call the clinic immediately if you observe any of these signs. Healthy puppies should be gaining weight daily. If possible, weigh the pups daily on a small kitchen or postal scale (a drop of nail polish on the top of the pup's head can help you distinguish between identical looking pups.) Any puppy that loses weight should be observed very carefully for signs of disease and offered extra feedings. Do not hesitate to contact the clinic if you have any questions or concerns about your puppies.