



## Whelping and Raising Puppies

### Whelping and Puppy Pen

Give the female all the advantages possible so she can produce a healthy litter. She needs an extra large house in which she can easily stand up and turn around. She should have extra room all around her when she lies down so she won't lie on the pups or be restricted during whelping. The whelping house should be equipped with a hinged or removable roof to make it easier to access the mother and pups.

Most litters should be planned to arrive during the spring, summer, or fall so the outside temperature is not too cold at birth. If you decide to have a winter litter you may have to plan on having the female inside a building where it is at least above freezing. Whelping can take place outside at lower temperatures but extreme caution should be used, especially with a female whelping for the first time or under exceptionally harsh weather conditions.

Summer temperatures above 70 degrees F can also be dangerous for the puppies. During their first few weeks of life puppies cannot regulate body temperature. Mosquitoes can also be a very serious problem for pups born during summer. You may need to whelp and raise the puppies inside your home if you have a bad mosquito problem or high temperatures.

Keep the whelping pen clean and dry. Many pathogens that are lethal to puppies are soil borne. In areas

where such pathogens are known to exist it is important to maintain a level of pathogen protection. Basic hand-washing before and after handling both mother and offspring will go a long way. Other practices such as shoe and boot pans placed outside of the whelping pen will also prevent various pathogens infecting the puppies. A boot brush and a solution made up of one part household bleach and 10 parts water will reduce the risk of introducing soil borne organisms into the puppy pen.

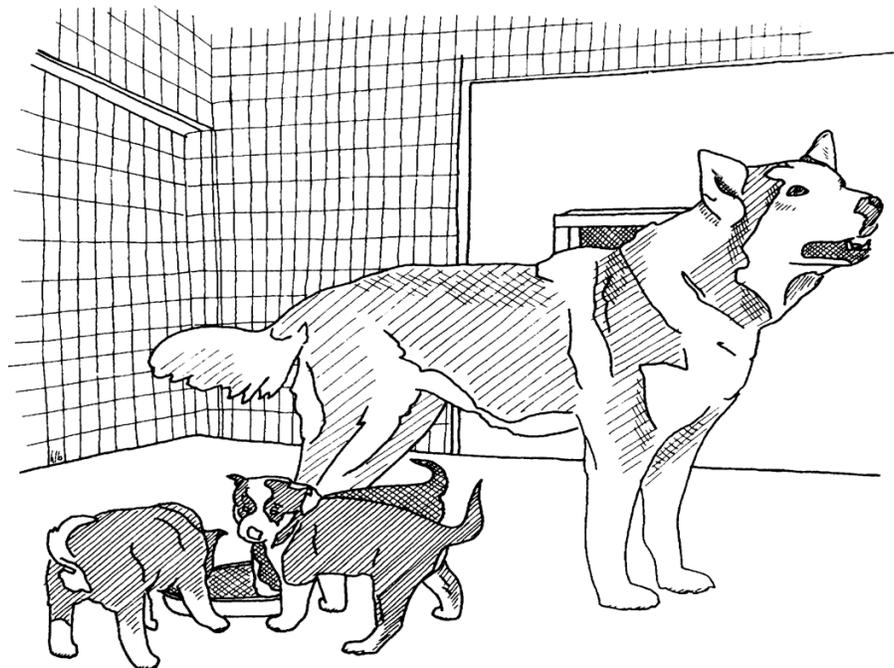
A whelping box provides a nest or den in which the female can whelp and begin raising her litter. It should be large enough to allow the female to stretch out without lying on or disturbing her puppies. It should be tall enough to contain the puppies but allow the mom to leave them when she desires.

The whelping box should be placed in a larger enclosure or pen either indoors or out as a primary containment for both the mom and puppies, but also isolate them from other dogs. Puppy pens should be a minimum of 100 square feet. If birds of prey might be a threat the pen should have a roof. Rawhide or hard rubber chews and balls are nice extras for the puppies' enjoyment. Ramps, tunnels and bridges provide mental stimulation. Be sure all additions are of sizes and made of materials that are safe for the puppies and mother.

The puppy pen needs to be cleaned at least once a day, or more often as needed. Whelping boxes need little bedding since the mother does most of the cleaning. If the puppies are reared in warmer months a smooth wooden floor will suffice.

### **Weaning and Feeding Puppies**

Puppies should be offered gruel of ground and soaked kibble beginning at three weeks of age to supplement what they receive via nursing. Puppy food or a performance diet is recommended. Puppies under four months should be fed two to three times per day or free fed. Puppies should be fed enough to keep them fleshed out and to ensure they have enough energy to grow, but they should not be allowed to become obese. (See [Feeding and Watering section](#).)



### **Weaning**

Mothers will usually wean puppies themselves when the pups are between four and a half and eight weeks old. If you wish to remove the mother from her pups at this time, you can. Ideally puppies should remain with the mother for the entire eight weeks. Emergency health situations may require early separation, but this should only be done under the direction of your veterinarian. If the pups are removed while the mother is still lactating the mother will need to be dried off. If the mammaries become firm, swollen, or red, consult your veterinarian.

Many mushers choose to leave the mother with the pups until the pups are individually tethered or penned. If the mother is still enjoying the pups and playing with them, this can be a good source of education for the puppies.

Reintroduce the mother to mushing slowly. She needs time to recover from nursing the pups. Short runs of 2 to 3 miles with the team are fine. Protect her enlarged nipples from cold weather for the whole season after whelping.

Puppies need to stay in the litter for at least eight weeks to ensure normal psychological development. During the fourth through sixth week, a puppy learns basic social behavior for dogs. If a puppy is removed from its family before six weeks it may have behavioral problems as an adult. When you rehome a pup, make sure you provide copies of all vaccination and deworming records to the new owner and caution him or her to change the pup's food slowly.

### **Puppy Health Care**

**Day 1:** Examine each puppy for abnormalities. Check the mouth for cleft palate. Make sure that all puppies are nursing, as it is important for the puppies to receive the mother's colostrum, which flows for only a few days. If you have any questions or problems, call your veterinarian right away.

**Day 2:** Remove dewclaws, if there are any, from both the front and rear paws. This prevents trouble with booties later on and prevents the dewclaws from getting caught on something and damaged. Have your veterinarian perform this procedure, or have a veterinarian or an experienced musher show you how to do it yourself.

**Three to four weeks:** Deworm with the product recommended by your veterinarian. Continue deworming the puppies and mother on a schedule recommended by your veterinarian.

**Eight weeks:** Vaccinate with a combination vaccine that is recommended in your area. These may include distemper, parvovirus, and adenovirus. Work with your veterinarian to develop a vaccination program to meet the specific needs of your team.

### **Rearing**

Just as children have formative years, puppies have formative months. Puppies need lots of human attention early. The more you put into your pups, the more you will get out of them as adults. Play with them at least a little every day so they don't become shy of people. Try to familiarize your puppies with as many different situations as possible by taking them on walks, bringing them inside, having children play with them, exposing them to crowds etc.

The most important time to develop a trusting, positive relationship with a pup is between its third to 16th weeks of life. Many people mistakenly believe that good genetics are all that are needed to produce a good sled dog. Without the proper care and training, a puppy with great potential can become a complete failure as a sled dog or pet. The following are some benchmarks in a puppy's development:

**One to three weeks:** During their first weeks of life, handle each puppy two or three times a day. Weigh them to ensure that no negative changes are occurring. Pet them and talk to them. Their relationships to humans can start from the day they are born.

**Three to sixteen weeks:** Introduce the puppies to as many unique experiences as possible. Between six and eight weeks is a particularly critical time for socialization with people. They can learn their names, learn to come when called, and develop a strong bond with humans during this stage of their development.

**Four to six months:** If tethering is the method of confinement this is the time to introduce them to this experience. Put a collar on each puppy and in the months following frequently check the collar's tightness and adjust it as the puppy grows. Place them on individual tethers.

**Five to eight months:** Harness training is most easily done during this stage of the puppies' development. Many methods are used: putting one or two pups in a small team with adults, or putting one adult leader with all the rest of the pups. Either way, the teams should be small (three to seven dogs), and the runs should be short (perhaps ½ to 3 miles). It is best not to have a steep down slope, icy trail or open water on the puppies' first few runs in harness. It is easy to scare a puppy. The most important thing is to let the pups have fun. Mushing will be an important part of their lives and it should always be a positive experience. Puppies should never be dragged along or pulled by a machine; they should always be going forward on their own accord and have the option to stop if they become frightened or tired.

Some puppies will have a natural instinct to pull the first time they are harnessed. Other puppies will be overwhelmed by being tugged by the neck while at the same time running next to another dog. To avoid this, you might want to connect a pup and a reliable lead dog with a neckline and let them run around for a few minutes. Be sure to do this away from the dog yard to avoid tangles. Repeat the experience a few days before running the pup in the team. This helps a puppy to learn to jump over the ropes and accustoms it to the neckline. Be careful to match compatible dogs, and be ready to jump high when they come toward you at full speed.

**Eight to twelve months:** It is important to get the pups out often in harness so that they learn all the basics of mushing while they are young: not getting tangled in the traces, pulling hard, urinating and defecating on the run, not chewing harnesses and gang lines, how to cross ice and water, how to pull on hills, forward and whoa commands, how to pass other teams, and most importantly, to have fun with their owner out on the trail. All of these are easiest and best learned when they are young.

**Twelve months:** At this point, a dog has attained its basic size, although depending on the breed and genetic background, many dogs continue to fill out until about two and a half years old. Also remember that although a dog is one year old and looks mature, it is not mentally mature yet and still needs much more time to develop before it can be expected to behave and perform like an adult.

Everything you would like to teach your dog (in addition to mushing) is also best done at an early age. At 4 to 12 months, their minds are open and responsive. For example, if they will spend a lot of time inside as adults or if they need to be obedience trained, put in the effort training them while they are young and make each experience positive and educational.