

Raising Puppy Litters Great and Small

Singleton and gargantuan litters each present a distinct set of needs and challenges to breeder, dam, and puppies.

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Raising a singleton litter, says Terri Gueck, a breeder of Tibetan Terriers in Abbotsford, British Columbia, "is as much if not more work than the large litters of seven to nine that I more often have." When there are several puppies they interact and play and learn about other dogs. A single pup has only his mom to learn from, and she is often tired of feeding and caring for him after a few weeks and prefers to be with her human family. The breeder has to take over to socialize him and to introduce him to the big world out there. Puppies have lots of energy, and the single puppy has no one to help him expend it. The breeder needs to spend playtime with the little guy, playing gentle tug-of-war with a toy, rolling a ball, and so on. Changes of location will help stimulate him; he should be allowed to explore the kitchen, family room, garden, and other areas under careful supervision.

Single babies tend to get spoiled and very full of themselves, thinking they are the most important thing in the universe because of all the attention they get. It is so tempting to feel sorry for the little lonely puppy and to carry him around and pet him at every opportunity. On the plus side, this bratty puppy often develops into a dog with an exceptional show ring attitude of, "Look at me, I'm so special!"

Helen Dohrmann, a Papillon breeder in Kent, Wash., says, "Having a small litter gives me much more individual time with each pup, which I think is a huge plus." Papillons are known for small litters, often of only one or two, and Dohrmann reports, "I have time for more socialization, more observation of personalities, and more basic training before they go to a new home. The new owners love that the puppies know 'Sit,' 'Down,' 'Go to Bed,' and [how to] walk on lead."

Introducing the single puppy to other dogs is vital for his mental development. If the breeder has other adult dogs, the youngster should be carefully introduced to them at a few weeks of age, perhaps starting off at first by being in a pen when he can see them. Letting the youngster run free with them should be done only with adults that will be gentle yet firm, without being aggressive. They will teach him some basic canine manners that he would have learned from his siblings, such as "biting hurts!"

Big Producers Different challenges face the breeder whose bitch produces a huge litter. If known to be carrying a lot of puppies (an ultrasound or X-ray can help determine this, although often the size of her belly will be a big clue), alert your vet to the possibility of a C-section. Gina Heitz, who breeds Golden Retrievers in Woodburn, Ore., monitors her bitches closely during labor to assess condition. She says, "Dehydration and fatigue from prolonged labor can quickly turn a situation into an emergency." A bitch can become exhausted from delivering a big litter over several hours, and uterine inertia can occur, where her contractions either stop or become too weak to push out a puppy.