

Think Outside the Box

The ultimate puppy nursery should be a warm, safe, well-equipped haven for all.

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Only 63 days and counting -- not too soon to start planning the ultimate puppy nursery. These nine weeks will fly by faster than a Corgi after a cookie. First thing's first: Decide on a whelping area. Pick one that is easily accessible for you, in the midst of activity (to acclimate pups to household bustle and noise), and yet offers privacy from nosy canines. Some mothers are protective of their brood and greet other dogs with warning growls. If your nursery is in the middle of the household, placing an ex-pen around the box will help to keep out unwanted visitors. Start saving those newspapers now! Beg, borrow and, yes, steal! from anywhere you can. Puppies and papers are like babies and diapers. Lastly, look through your towels and treat yourself to a new set, relegating the old, worn, soft ones to the puppy room. You will use twice as many as you think.

Home Away from Home

Once you know your bitch is truly expecting, build a sturdy whelping box. If this is to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, borrowing might be an option. But if you intend to be a breeder, you'll want a box that will last many years. Ours has seen nearly 50 litters of German Shepherd Dogs and Bearded Collies, and has spanned a period of 25 years!

This will be Mama dog's home for about five weeks, and should be large enough for her to lie down and fully stretch out, along with her litter of rapidly growing pups. Once the pups are weaned, you may want to move them to a safe play pen with a sleeping box, play area, and separate toilet spot.

Any home, even a temporary one, should have the basic necessities: food and water bowls, heat (more about that to come!), trash disposal (a bag or 10 will do), a get-away area for the dam, a radio or TV, and a phone. The latter two are for the human part of this partnership, but are vitally important during long waits between puppies. The phone can serve as a reach-out-and-touch-me device to spread the exciting news, or in the event you have urgent questions or an emergency, to reach the all-important veterinarian on call.

Most dams have to be coaxed (or coerced) to leave the nest during the first couple of days, but once her fledglings are fat, content and sleeping, she'll often want to move to a cooler area where she can keep an eye on the little ones and rest. This is particularly appealing to her once those little needle-teeth appear!

During whelping, and later as pups begin running around, newspapers soak up all fluids and wastes. A blanket or rug is wise, however, for pups to have good footing while they're in the box, and to use as a sleeping area. A "pig rail" around the sides of the box is a good idea especially for newborns of large and giant breeds, which will want something to lie up against without risk of being squashed.

Make one side of the box hinged so that the dam can go in and out easily. Later, as pups grow, she'll be so desperate to escape (or to visit), she'll easily hop over the full height. Even my "Lead Bottom" managed easily, although she always rolled her eyes at an obedience or agility jump.