

Of Puppies and Babies

Picture this: Your pet dog is in labor. Instead of leaving her in the quiet corner she has chosen, you bundle her into the car and take her to a strange, brightly lit house bustling with strangers who keep poking and peering at her. As each puppy is born, it is positioned at one of her teats for a few minutes to see if it will latch on. If it doesn't, it's washed, wrapped, and put in a separate box until later.

When your watch tells you the puppies are hungry, you take them from their little boxes and put them with their mother. Some are too sleepy or too frantic to nurse at first, but most of them finally settle in. After 5 minutes, you remove them from the teats (not an easy task; they don't want to let go) and rearrange them on different teats, where they may or may not reattach. When your watch tells you they are full, you remove them (still not an easy job), wrap them well, and return them to their separate boxes. If they cry before it's time to be hungry again, you jiggle them, distract them, or try to get them to suck on a pretend teat. At night, you listen to them cry in their separate boxes while they learn to self-comfort.

Do you think your dog will have an easy labor and birth? Will the puppies have any trouble learning to nurse? Will the mother and puppies feel relaxed and comfortable together? Have you found the simplest way to keep the puppies warm and content? Are you the best one to judge when the puppies need to nurse? *Do you have the feeling you're putting a lot of unnecessary energy into this project?*

We were mammals long before we were intellectuals. We can use our intellect to overcome birth and breastfeeding problems, but it's much easier if those problems aren't there in the first place. Birth goes more smoothly and quickly for any mammal with quiet and privacy. Keep that in mind when you choose your birth place, and pull the blanket over your head if you must, to find your own private space. Give your baby time to get used to breathing, seeing, and hearing before expecting her to nurse, but keep her with you until she does. There's plenty of time for cleaning and measuring later. Interrupting that first hour interferes with your instincts and hers, and can make nursing more complicated for both of you.

"Wear" your baby. Her heart rate, breathing, and temperature are most stable in your arms. Share sleep with her, as her ancestors always did. Nurse her before she cries, and don't ask her for a reason. If she's nursing contentedly on one side, let her stay there. The other side will keep. You'll find your baby cries least if you treat her like the baby mammal that she is. Your instincts to keep her close and content are the instincts that have always helped babies thrive, and you'll both be less stressed if you follow them. Best of all, you'll have more energy for living and loving if you put less energy into separating. Why make a simple job complicated?

(Oh, and by the way, do take the puppies out of those silly little boxes!)

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