

# Puppy Handling Protocol

## Why is this important?

Puppies' experiences during development can have a lifelong impact on their behavior. Significant benefits are met when puppies as young as 3 days of age up to 16 weeks of age are handled by different people. During this period, puppies need to meet and enjoy interaction with many different people, play with other dogs and puppies, learn to tolerate all kinds of handling, and experience everyday sights, sounds, smells and sensations. Failure to provide adequate socialization and training during a puppy's development can result in the development of fear- and aggression-related behavior problems once the puppy reaches adulthood. Often, such problems result in relinquishment to a shelter or euthanasia. That's why it's so important to incorporate simple behavior protocols into temporary sheltering routines. Doing so can literally save a dog's life.

The following guide outlines recommendations for handling puppies in a temporary shelter from the age of day 3 to 16 weeks. Depending on the specific circumstances, some of these recommendations might need to be overruled by medical or logistical priorities

Neonatal handling, prior to 3 weeks of age, has been shown to have physiological benefits. such as improved heart rate, stronger heartbeats and adrenal glands, increased tolerance to stress and a greater resistance to disease. Early Neurological Stimulation Exercises (ENS) are conducted on puppies once a day between 3 to 16 days of age.

Continuing handling exercises with puppies over 16 days of age helps teach them to be comfortable being handled by people. Puppies that are comfortable with handling make daily care and medical procedures efficient and safe for both puppy and responder.

The following guide outlines appropriate handling for puppies during the first 16 weeks of life.

## Early Neurological Stimulation Exercises (Puppies 3 days to 16 days)

Early neurological stimulation (ENS) exercises provide a mild form of stress for very young puppies. This mild stress has been found to have a beneficial effect on dogs later in life. Puppies who receive this early neurological stimulation have improved heart rate, stronger heart beats, stronger adrenal glands, more tolerance to stress and a greater resistance to disease. These exercises are in addition to, and not a substitution for regular handling and socialization.

ENS Exercises involve handling a puppy once per day. Each session includes 5 exercises (in no preferential order). All five exercises are completed with one puppy before handling the next puppy.

All puppies must be cleared for ENS exercises by the Medical Lead and assigned PPE must be worn. All responders conducting ENS exercises must be approved by Shelter Lead and Medical Lead.



### **1. Tactile stimulation**

While holding the puppy in one hand, tickle the puppy between the toes on one foot (Q-tip can be used for tickling). *Tickle for three to five seconds.* The puppy does not have to show a reaction.

### **2. Head held erect**

Holding the puppy in both hands, position the puppy so its head is directly above its body. *Hold this position for three to five seconds.*



### **3. Head pointed down**

Holding the puppy in both hands, reverse the puppy's position so its tail is uppermost and directly above its head. *Hold this position for three to five seconds.*

#### 4. Supine position

Hold the puppy in the palm of your hands or on your outstretched legs so it is resting on its back with its face pointed upward. *Hold this position for three to five seconds.*



#### 5. Thermal stimulation

Before starting the exercises, place a damp towel in the refrigerator for at least five minutes. For this exercise, place the puppy on the cool towel, belly down. Allow the puppy to wriggle off if it desires. *Remove the puppy from the towel after three to five seconds*, if it hasn't moved off the towel on its own.

It is important to remember that while mild stress can have beneficial effects, overstimulation can have detrimental effects. Each exercise should be conducted for only **3-5 secs each** and **ONCE** per day.

### Handling & Restraint Exercises (Puppies 3 weeks to 16 weeks)

Extensive research indicates that puppies need to be handled by people starting at 3 to 6 weeks of age. Handling not only teaches puppies to be comfortable with handling but can help prevent future handling problems.

- It's best for puppies to be handled by as many different responders as possible. All responders handling puppies must be approved by the Shelter Lead and Medical Lead.
- Puppies aged 3 to 16 weeks can be securely but comfortably restrained for 1 to 3 minutes at a time. During restraint, the responder can gently stroke and examine different parts of the puppy's body. He or she can also randomly feed the puppy a couple of approved bite-sized treats—as long as the puppy isn't struggling at the time.
- If a puppy struggles against restraint, hold her firmly until she relaxes. When she does relax, wait for 3 to 5 seconds and then release her. NEVER release a puppy from restraint when she's struggling to get free. (That will teach her that struggling works!)

- To teach puppies to enjoy having body parts handled, use this simple protocol:
  1. First, touch a part of the puppy's body.
  2. Then, immediately afterward, offer the puppy a bite-sized treat. The treat should be a surprise. The puppy shouldn't see or nibble on it in advance.
  3. Repeat, concentrating on the ears, muzzle, tail and paws.
  4. When your handling session is completed, engage puppy in a brief play session before returning to her kennel.

If the puppy displays a disproportionate negative reaction to handling and/or restraint, see extreme behaviors below, inform the Behavior Lead as soon as possible.

### **Extreme Behaviors**

- High pitched shrieking/yelping lasting longer than a few seconds
- Body thrashing combined with growling
- Showing teeth
- Trying to bite (not including normal puppy mouthing)
- Urination, defecation or anal sac expression

### **Puppy "Temper Tantrums"**

Puppies sometimes have temper tantrums. Usually tantrums happen when you're making a puppy do something he doesn't like. Something as benign as simply holding him still or handling his body might upset him. Tantrums can also happen when play escalates.

If you're handling a puppy and he starts to throw a temper tantrum, avoid yelping like you're hurt or releasing him. Doing this might actually cause him to continue or intensify his aggressive behavior. Instead, be very calm and unemotional. Don't hurt the puppy, but continue to hold him firmly without constriction, if possible, until he stops struggling. After he's quieted down for just a second or two, let him go and stop your handling session. Notify your Team Lead and complete a Behavior Incident Form.

### **Tips and Pointers**

- **Set-up for success.** Conduct your handling session after your puppy has been exercised for the day and before a meal. Use approved high value treats. Conduct session during quiet times. Try to avoid conducting sessions during times of stimulating/stressful activity (i.e. deep cleaning, feeding, construction).

- **Remember: handling/restraint stimulus FIRST, treat SECOND.** Don't present your stimulus and food at the same time. There should be a distinct order. The stimulus should predict the delivery of the treat.
- **Throw in some easy reps.** As you progress, throw in a rep or two that your puppy will find really easy to tolerate.
- **Vary the length of pauses** between reps. Sometimes pause for just a second or two. Sometimes wait a little longer.

