

Media Communication

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The unfortunate consequences of removing a pet from its mother too soon

The excitement of getting a new puppy or kitten doesn't seem to waiver even as you get older. Few are immune to the cute factor, and the younger the pet the more overwhelming the emotion felt. Even so, the Pet Food Industry Association of Southern Africa (PFI) encourages new pet owners not to be swayed into removing a baby from its mother before at least 8 or 9 weeks (12 weeks is optimal), as the resultant issues can be devastating for the animal and your relationship. Unless, of course, an emergency presents itself.

The learning that occurs within these first 8 – 9 weeks, from both litter mates and mother, is immense, and is shaping the animal's temperament and personality for the rest of its life. When valuable life lessons are missed the potential for your new pet to experience psychological, behavioural and emotional issues are increased.

Weaning is an extremely important part of learning that animals must go through. It teaches the animal about the pressure of its bite, to hopefully result in a pet that is controlled, with a "soft mouth" (which can often reduce damage if a pet is ever forced to bite) and teaches the pet about frustration control. Aside from the emotional and behavioural benefits of nursing, physiological and nutritive needs are also being met. When removed from the litter too early (before weaning at about 6 weeks), young pets are immediately put at a disadvantage by not getting the exact nutrition they require at that age to support their rapidly growing frame, which only their mother can supply. Leading up to the 8 – 9 week mark, the mother's interactions with the puppy changes and she begins to modify behaviour. The puppy or kitten is "disciplined" into knowing what behaviour is tolerable and what is not tolerated, while also learning effective communication and appropriate inter-species behaviour – something humans will really struggle to replicate or correct. Leaving the emotional support of the litter too early can result in timid and fearful pets that are unable to deal with everyday challenges and frustrations.

The resultant challenges that one may experience when bringing a pet home too early are vast and varied. They can be as serious as a dog that bites out of fear or cannot be left alone due to separation anxiety to being nutritionally disadvantaged resulting in potential lifelong medical issues. Most concerns will require professional intervention, which new owners seldom have budgeted for and the pet-owner relationship may also be severely damaged. Without the time and knowhow to manage these shortcomings we may be left with another unwanted pet.

None of this matches up to the pretty picture that you had when deciding to bring a new life into your home. Don't set yourself up for failure - before entering into an agreement to purchase or adopt a new pet ask about the age at which the breeder or shelter will release the animal. If it's anything less than the recommended age (at least 8 – 9 weeks), walk away. The lack of knowledge or consideration for what is best for the pet could be indicative of other shortcomings too, such as impoverished or sterile environments, which also do a massive disservice to the animal in the long run.

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The Pet Food Industry Association of Southern Africa (PFI) is a non-profit, industry Association, made up of industry players that, by becoming a member, commit to the same principles and ethics of the PFI – to uphold safe, quality pet nutrition, which has the best interests of the pet as its sole purpose. A list of members is available on www.pfisa.co.za

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