



WELFARE & NUTRITION

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PRE-WEANING GROUP HOUSING AFFECTS FIGHTING ACTIVITY AND DAILY WEIGHT GAIN OF PIGLETS WHEN MIXED WITH UNFAMILIAR CONSPECIFICS AFTER WEANING

M. Fels, L. Schrey, S. Rauterberg, T. Nicolaisen, N. Kemper.

Institute for Animal Hygiene, Animal Welfare and Farm Animal Behaviour, University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover (Foundation), Hannover, Germany.

Introduction

Pre-weaning group housing for sows and their litters becomes increasingly important in order to enhance sow welfare. However, there is still a lack of knowledge concerning potential benefits for piglets during the post-weaning period.

Material & Methods

In the present study, weaner pigs were mixed in groups of 10, using littermates (LM) originating from pre-weaning group housing (Gr) and from farrowing pens with crates (Co). The following variations were studied in three replicates: Gr/Gr (5 LM from Gr + 5 LM from Gr; litters familiar), Gr/Co (5 LM from Gr + 5 LM from Co; litters unfamiliar), Co/Co (5 LM from Co + 5 LM from Co; litters unfamiliar).

Results

During 24 hours after mixing, piglets in Co/Co fought more than piglets in Gr/Co and Gr/Gr (32 vs 24.5 vs 1 fights/piglet; $p < 0.05$), showing also more aggression against their own LM (6 vs 2 vs 0 fights/piglet). Within Gr/Co, piglets originating from Co fought more against their LM than piglets from Gr (7 vs 1 fights/piglet). Four days after mixing, piglets in Gr/Gr had lower mean lesion scores than piglets in Gr/Co, those in turn were less injured than piglets in Co/Co (7.6 vs 11.6 vs 17.6; $p < 0.05$). Within four days after weaning, piglets in Co/Co had lower daily weight gains than in Gr/Co and Gr/Gr (197.3 g vs 274.4 g and 325.6 g; $p < 0.05$). Until the end of rearing, no significant difference was found (573.0 g vs 522.6 g vs 531.8 g).

Discussion & Conclusion

In mixed groups Gr/Co, piglets fought less, were less injured and gained more weight immediately after weaning than piglets in Co/Co. We conclude that positive effects of pre-weaning socialization can also be expected when piglets meet unfamiliar conspecifics after weaning. This can be particularly important when weaner pigs from different farms are mixed.