

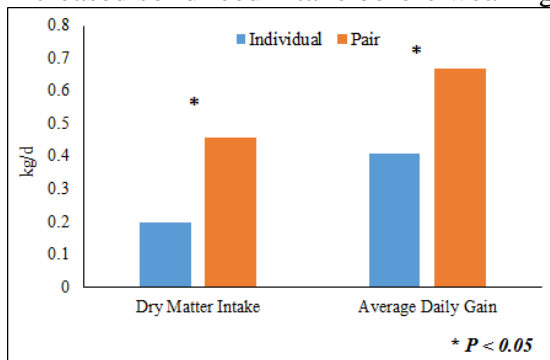
## Benefits to Socially Housing Calves

By: Lindsay Ferlito

I recently attended the Dairy Cattle Welfare Symposium in Kissimmee, FL, which included talks on judicious antibiotic usage, CRISPR, the ethics of animal welfare, and the benefits of group housing for calves. About 75% of calves are housed individually on dairies in the US, with the majority housed outside in individual hutches (NAHMS, 2014). A lot of producers use individual housing to try to reduce the spread of disease, and they are worried about the risks of larger groups. Larger group size has been associated with more respiratory problems, and can create a management and labor issue as it becomes harder to identify sick calves immediately, and there is usually more competition for nipples and milk making it harder for a sick animal to access feed. However, group housing does not mean you need a robotic feeder and a group of 20 animals. Group (or social) housing is anything more than one calf, so even pair housing counts.

More and more research is being done to better understand the benefits of social housing for calves. Some significant benefits include:

### 1. Increased solid feed intake before weaning and increased weight gain.



*Miller-Cushon, E. K., and T. J. DeVries. 2016. J. Dairy Sci. 99:1–12.*

### 2. Improved social learning, more adaptable calves, and reduced fearfulness.

- Pair-housed calves had less of a behavioral response (less vocalizations) during weaning than individually-housed calves (Bolt et al., 2017).
- Socially housed calves were less reactive when encountering an unknown calf (De Paula Vieira et al., 2012), and more likely to eat a novel feed (Costa et al., 2014).
- Socially housed calves were quicker at adapting and relearning a cognitive task (Gaillard et al., 2014).

### 3. More useable space.

- Even though you are providing the same amount of space per calf, the calves now have more useable space to play, exercise, and socialize.

### 4. Consumer perspective.

- During a consumer panel at the conference, the consumers were asked about cow/calf separation, and most of them said they would be ok with it if they knew the calves were well taken care of, happy, and had socialization. Social and pair housing is a way to help address this concern.

The good news is that you don't necessarily need to build a new barn, or make a big investment to implement social housing on your dairy. For example, a producer at the conference, Jamie from New Mexico, utilizes what he calls a "buddy hutch" system. He puts calves into an individual hutch for a few days (until they are eating well alone) and then he pairs them with the hutch beside them and connects the fencing around both hutches. He said it works very well, his calves do great, and they almost always share one hutch (which is good for sharing body heat during our frigid winters).



*(Pictures from Jamie, NM)*

The conference also had a producer panel on calf housing, and one farmer that uses social housing said that you can't go less than 45 sq ft/calf. You also need to feed calves an adequate amount of milk or milk replacer (not just 10% of body weight!) and this helps keep calves healthy, and reduces cross-sucking.

Some good rules to follow with social housing:

- Keep the number of calves per group low (<10 calves/pen).
- Keep the age range from the youngest to the oldest calf in each group low (<2 weeks).
- Provide enough space per calf (>45 sq ft).
- Ensure adequate access to feed and water for all animals in the group.
- Your farm size will play a role as it's hard to make a group of 8 in under 2 weeks when you only have 1 heifer calf born each week.

Ultimately, you need to develop a system that works on your farm with your team, whether that's hutches, pair-housing, or larger groups with automatic feeders.