1	Brief Communication
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4	Higher-order trace conditioning in newborn rabbits
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7	Gérard Coureaud <sup>1</sup> , Nina Colombel <sup>1,2</sup> , Patricia Duchamp-Viret <sup>1</sup> , Guillaume Ferreira <sup>2</sup>
8	<sup>1</sup> Sensory NeuroEthology Group, Lyon Neuroscience Research Center, INSERM U1028,
9	CNRS UMR 5292, Lyon 1 University, Jean-Monnet University, Bron, France; <sup>2</sup> FoodCircus
10	group, NutriNeuro Lab, INRAE 1286, Bordeaux University, Bordeaux, France.
11	
12	Corresponding author: Gérard Coureaud, Centre de Recherche en Neurosciences de Lyon
13	(Lyon Neuroscience Research Center), 95 Boulevard Pinel, 69675 Bron cedex, France.
14	E-mail: gerard.coureaud@cnrs.fr
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## 28 Abstract

Temporal contingency is a key factor in associative learning but remains weakly investigated 29 early in life. Few data suggest simultaneous presentation is required for young to associate 30 different stimuli, whereas adults can learn them sequentially. Here, we investigated the ability 31 of newborn rabbits to perform sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning using 32 trace intervals between odor presentations. Strikingly, pups are able to associate odor stimuli 33 with 10- and 30-sec intervals in sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning, 34 respectively. The effectiveness of higher-order trace conditioning in newborn rabbits reveals 35 that very young animals can display complex learning despite their relative immaturity. 36

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## 38 Text

Temporal contiguity between stimuli is usually considered essential for associative learning in 39 40 adult individuals (Pavlov 1927). However, first-order conditioning remains effective when a trace interval (TI), usually 10 to 30 sec, is inserted between the conditioned stimulus (CS) and 41 42 unconditioned stimulus (US) (e.g., Kamin 1954; Ost et al. 1968; Kirkpatrick and Balsam 43 2016). In higher-order conditioning such as sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning, two CSs, CS1 and CS2, are paired before or after the CS1 is paired with a US, 44 respectively (Brogden 1939; Rescorla 1980a). Here again, conditioning is possible in adult 45 rats when the CS1 and CS2 are separated by a short TI, and this is true for both sensory 46 preconditioning (Silver and Meyer 1954; Lavin 1976; Lyn and Capaldi 1994; Holmes and 47 Westbrook 2017) and second-order conditioning (Rescorla 1982, Stout et al. 2004). 48

Very young individuals exhibit robust first- and higher-order conditioning when pairings involved simultaneous presentations of the to-be-conditioned stimuli (Cheslock et al. 2003; for review: Cuevas and Giles 2016). However, a few studies suggest that they might be particularly sensitive to the insertion of a TI between stimulus presentation in training (e.g., first-order conditioning: Moye and Rudy 1987; Ivkovich et al. 2000; Barnet and Hunt 2005;
higher-order conditioning: Cheatle and Rudy 1979; Cheslock et al. 2003). Indeed, sequential
conditioning becomes more efficient with age in human infants (Cuevas and Giles 2016) and
young animals (Chen et al. 1991).

In the European rabbit, newborns can learn new odorants through first- and higher-order 57 conditioning. The mammary pheromone (MP) emitted by lactating rabbit females in their 58 59 milk not only triggers stereotyped orocephalic movements allowing for pups to search and grasp the maternal nipples (Coureaud 2001; Schaal et al. 2003) but also remarkably promotes 60 associative odor learning. Indeed, the MP acts as a US inducing appetitive conditioning to an 61 odorant (CS1) by simultaneous and brief pairing: 24h later, the CS1 triggers a conditioned 62 orocephalic searching-grasping response similar to the response triggered by the US 63 (Coureaud et al. 2006, 2009). Rabbit pups are also able to respond to a second odorant (CS2) 64 65 when CS1+MP pairing is followed by simultaneous CS1+CS2 pairing, demonstrating secondorder conditioning (Coureaud et al. 2011), but also when simultaneous exposure to CS1+CS2 66 preceded CS1+MP pairing, demonstrating sensory preconditioning (Coureaud et al. 2013). 67 These higher-order conditionings seem to be associative in nature as unpaired presentations of 68 either CS1 and US or CS1 and CS2 impede CS2 responding (Coureaud et al. 2011, 2013). In 69 70 particular, sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning do not occur if CS1 and CS2 are separated by a 1-min TI (Coureaud et al. 2011, 2013). However, the effectiveness of 71 shorter TIs in supporting higher-order conditioning remains to be evaluated in newborn 72 73 rabbits. The present study provides this evaluation.

To that goal we used 305 newborn rabbits (from 64 litters) and odorants A, B and MP (see below) purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (France). Only 4 or 5 pups per litter were used per experiment (they were included in a single group, i.e. not used in more than one condition). To avoid interference with the pups' prandial state (Montigny et al. 2006) experiments always occurred at 10:30 a.m., one hour before the daily nursing. Statistics consisted in comparison of proportion of responding pups to the stimuli by the Cochran Q test and  $\chi^2$  test of McNemar when pups from a same group are tested to distinct stimuli, and  $\chi^2$  test of Pearson when pups from distinct groups are tested to the same stimulus.

82 First, in order to confirm that simultaneous pairing of CS1+CS2 promotes sensory preconditioning, 1-day old pups (n = 15) were exposed in a behavioral room (adjacent to the 83 animal housing room) by sub-group of 5 neonates as a maximum (in order to optimize their 84 exposure) to a mixture of odorants A (ethyl-isobutyrate, 10<sup>-5</sup> g/ml) and B (ethyl maltol, 10<sup>-5</sup> 85 g/ml). The exposure happened in a plastic basin through a scented cotton glove positioned 1 86 cm above the litter for 5 min (timer-controlled by a second experimenter) then immediately 87 retired. On day 2, the pups were conditioned to odorant A by simultaneous pairing with MP 88 (2-methylbut-2-enal, 10<sup>-5</sup> g/ml) for 5 min in a new basin and through a new glove (the basins 89 90 were rinsed with alcohol, water and then dried after each use; the gloves were used only once per experiment). On day 3, the pups were individually tested in an oral activation test (e.g. 91 Schaal et al. 2003; Coureaud et al. 2009, 2011, 2013) during which each pup was immobilized 92 in one hand of the experimenter, its head being left free, and the test odor was presented for 93 10 s with a glass-rod 0.5 cm in front of the nares. The response was positive when the 94 stimulus elicited vigorous scanning movements of the head during stretching toward the rod 95 96 followed by oral grasping of the rod; non-responding pups displayed no response but sniffing. Under the present conditions, the pups responded to both odorants A and B as well as to MP 97 (A vs. B vs. MP: Cochran's Q test = 2, P = 0.37). For second-order conditioning, 1-day-old 98 pups (n = 9) were conditioned to odorant A (by simultaneous pairing with MP for 5 min) and 99 exposed on day 2 to A+B for 5 min (here and hereafter: same procedure of exposure as 100 above). On day 3, pups responded in a strong and similar manner to A, B and MP (A vs. B vs. 101 MP: Q = 2, P = 0.37). 102

To determine if an TI between presentations of neutral odorants would affect sensory 103 preconditioning, 1-day-old pups were exposed to odorants A then B for 2.5 min each with a 104 10-sec (n = 15) or 30-sec TI (n = 15); the exposure to each odorant was made in distinct 105 basins separated by more than 1 meter in a permanently ventilated room, to avoid any 106 contamination between the different odorants. On day 2, they were conditioned to odorant A 107 (by simultaneous pairing with MP for 5 min). Strikingly, pups responded strongly and 108 similarly on day 3 to A, B and MP after 10-sec TI (A vs. B vs. MP: Q = 3, P = 0.22). 109 However, pups responded to A and MP but not to B after 30-sec TI (A vs. B vs. MP: Q = 18, 110 P < 0.001; 2 x 2 comparisons by  $\chi^2$  test of McNemar: B vs. MP or A:  $\chi^2 \ge 7.1$ , P < 0.01) (Fig. 111 1A-B). These results support the presence of sensory preconditioning in the 10- but not the 112 30-sec condition. Indeed, the proportions of responders to A after 10- and 30-sec TI were 113 strong and similar ( $\chi^2 < 0.5$ , P > 0.05) while they dropped dramatically to B after 30-114 compared to 10-sec TI ( $\chi^2 = 13.5, P < 0.001$ ). 115

Similar results were obtained when preconditioning to A then B was followed by 116 conditioning to B (Fig. 1C-D) and after reverse exposure to the odorants (B then A) during 117 preconditioning then conditioning to odorant A or B (Fig. 1E-H): pups responded to A, B and 118 MP after 10-sec TI but only to the conditioned odorant after 30-sec TI (n = 10 per group; Q =119 2, P > 0.05 with 10 sec of TI; Q > 12,  $\chi^2 \ge 7.1$ , and P < 0.05 in comparisons between A and B 120 or MP with 30 sec of TI; drop in responsiveness to A in Fig. C vs. D and G vs. H:  $\chi^2 \ge 7.2$ , P 121 < 0.05, and in responsiveness to B between the 10- and 30-sec condition in Fig. E-F:  $\chi^2 = 9.8$ , 122 P < 0.01). Therefore, two main results emerged from these data: 1) sensory preconditioning 123 was still effective when a short TI (10-sec) takes place between the odorants during initial 124 exposure, and 2) it was present and equivalent in the forward (CS2//CS1, CS1+US) and 125 backward (CS1//CS2, CS1+US) protocols. 126

To assess whether second-order conditioning would also tolerate TIs, 1-day-old pups were 127 conditioned to odorant A (by simultaneous pairing with MP for 5 min) and exposed the day 128 after to odorants A then B for 2.5 min each with a 10-sec (n = 10) or 30-sec TI (n = 10). On 129 day 3, pups responded highly and similarly to A, B and MP after the 10-sec TI (A vs. B vs. 130 MP: Q = 2, P = 0.37) but also after the 30-sec TI (A vs. B vs. MP: Q = 4, P = 0.14) (Fig. 2A-131 B). When the same experiment was conducted with a 60-sec TI between A and B, pups 132 significantly responded to A and MP but not to B (n = 10; A vs. B vs. MP: Q = 11, P < 0.01; 133 B vs. MP:  $\chi^2 = 5.1$ , P < 0.05; A vs. MP:  $\chi^2 = 1.3$ , P = 0.25; drop in responsiveness to B 134 between 30- and 60-sec:  $\chi^2 = 7.9$ , P < 0.01) (Fig. 2C). Similar results were obtained after 135 conditioning to odorant A and reverse exposure to the odorants (B then A) (Fig. D-F) and 136 conditioning to B followed by exposure to B then A (Fig. G-H): pups responded to A, B and 137 MP after the 10- and 30-sec TI but only to the conditioned stimulus after 60-sec TI (n = 10138 per group;  $Q \le 4$ , P > 0.05 with 10- and 30-sec TI; Q > 15,  $\chi^2 \ge 5.1$  and P < 0.05 in 139 comparisons between A and B or MP with 60-sec TI; responsiveness to odorant B in Fig. E 140 vs. F:  $\chi^2 = 7.9$ , P < 0.01, and to odorant A in Fig. G vs. H:  $\chi^2 = 5.2$ , P < 0.05). Thus, second-141 order trace conditioning was functional in the forward (CS1+US, CS2//CS1) and backward 142 (CS1+US, CS1//CS2) protocols in newborn rabbits with longer TI (30-sec instead of 10-sec) 143 than sensory preconditioning. 144

To determine if this difference was related to the age of the pups at A and B exposure, i.e. day 1 for sensory preconditioning *but* day 2 for second-order conditioning, 12 pups were exposed on day 2 to odorants A then B with 30-sec TI, and conditioned to A on day 3. On day 4, pups responded to A and MP but not to B (A vs. B vs. MP: Q = 17, P < 0.001; B vs. MP or A:  $\chi^2 \ge 6.1$ , P < 0.05; data not shown) indicating sensory preconditioning was ineffective with a 30-sec TI. Thus, the difference of TI tolerated by the two procedures does not depend on the age of the newborns.

Natural environment of animals is extremely complex chemically: animals are exposed to 152 numerous odor molecules and mixtures of molecules. We thus investigated higher-order trace 153 conditioning in newborn rabbits using more than two odorants, i.e. three odorants. We first 154 demonstrated that pups responded strongly and similarly to A, B and C (ethyl acetoacetate; 155 Sigma-Aldrich) after simultaneous exposure to the 3 odorants in both preconditioning and 156 second-order conditioning procedures (n = 10 per group; A vs. B vs. C vs. MP: Q < 2, P >157 0.05) (Fig. 3A,D). Thus, rabbit pups exhibit robust higher-order conditioning to three odorants 158 after simultaneous presentation. 159

To assess whether sensory preconditioning was effective with sequential exposure to 3 160 odorants, 1-day-old pups were exposed to odorants A then B then C for 2.5 min each with a 161 10-sec or 30-sec TI (n = 10 per group). Pups were then conditioned to A on day 2 and tested 162 for their responsiveness to the distinct odorants on day 3. After the 10-sec TI, pups responded 163 highly and similarly to A, B and MP, but not to C (A vs. B vs. C vs. MP: Q = 23, P < 0.001; C 164 vs. MP, A or B:  $\chi^2 \ge 6.1$ , P < 0.05) (Fig. 3B), whereas pups responded only to A and MP after 165 the 30-sec TI (A vs. B vs. C vs. MP: Q = 26, P < 0.001; B or C vs. A or MP:  $\chi^2 \ge 7.1$ , P < 0.001166 0.01; drop in responsiveness to B between 30- and 60-sec:  $\chi^2 = 12.9$ , P < 0.001) (Fig. 3C). 167 Thus, backward sensory preconditioning tolerated the same TI with two or three odorants in 168 newborn rabbits, i.e. 10-sec but not 30-sec. However, the effect was only partial after 10-sec 169 TI as behavioral response extended only to the odorant (B here) that directly followed the 170 odorant that was conditioned (odorant A). 171

172 Regarding second-order conditioning with sequential exposure to three odorants, pups 173 were conditioned to odorant A on day 1 before being exposed on day 2 to odorants A then B 174 then C for 2.5 min each with a 10-sec, 30-sec or 60-sec TI (n = 10 per group). On day 3, pups 175 responded strongly and similarly to A, B and MP but not to C with 10-sec (A vs. B vs. C vs. 176 MP: Q = 18, P < 0.001; C vs. MP or B:  $\chi^2 = 6.1$ , P < 0.05; C vs. A:  $\chi^2 = 3.1$ , P = 0.08) and 30-

sec TI (A vs. B vs. C vs. MP: Q = 25, P < 0.001; C vs. MP, A or B:  $\chi^2 \ge 7.1$ , P < 0.01) (Fig. 177 E-F) whereas pups only responded to A and MP with the 60-sec TI (A vs. B vs. C vs. MP: Q 178 = 30, P < 0.001; B or C vs. A or MP:  $\chi^2 \ge 10$ , P < 0.005, drop in responsiveness to B between 179 30- and 60-sec:  $\gamma^2 = 12.9$ , P < 0.001) (Fig. 3G). Thus, backward second-order conditioning 180 tolerated the same 30-sec TI with two or three odorants in rabbit pups but, as for sensory 181 preconditioning, with a partial effect as soon as 10-sec TI with three odorants; pups indeed 182 responded only to the odorant that directly followed the presentation of the conditioned one 183 but not to the third odorant (odorant C here). 184

According to previous literature in rat pups and human babies, trace conditioning would be 185 non-functional in early life, as newborns do not tolerate any delay between stimuli to be 186 associated, whereas older animals do (Cheatle and Rudy 1979; Moye and Rudy 1987; Chen et 187 al. 1991; Ivkovich et al. 2000; Barnet and Hunt 2005; Cuevas and Giles 2016). Similarly, 188 189 previous studies indicate rabbit pups cannot display first-order trace conditioning with 0-sec TI (Coureaud et al. 2006, 2011, 2013). Regarding the importance of hippocampus in first-190 order trace conditioning with discrete cues (Goldsberry et al. 2015; Kitamura et al. 2015), the 191 failure of this first-order trace conditioning in rabbit neonates might result from the late 192 maturation of the hippocampus. 193

The present study strikingly shows that rabbit pups are however able to form higher-order 194 trace conditioning, and that different TI between odor presentations are tolerated: 10-sec TI 195 for sensory preconditioning and 30-sec TI for second-order conditioning, regardless of the 196 order of CSs presentation (forward or backward CS1-CS2 pairing). Similar greater tolerance 197 for longer TI in second-order conditioning over sensory preconditioning was previously 198 demonstrated in newborn rats, as immediate-sequential (0-sec TI) presentation of odor CSs 199 impedes sensory preconditioning but not second-order conditioning; the latter being not 200 effective with a 30-sec TI (Cheslock et al. 2003). 201

Sequential higher-order conditioning with three odorants provided similar but also novel 202 information compared to two odorants in newborn rabbits. As with two odorants, backward 203 sensory preconditioning was effective with 10-sec TI and backward second-order 204 conditioning with 30-sec TI. However, these procedures were only partially effective since 205 the pups did only respond to the odorant that directly followed the conditioned one (and not to 206 the third one in the sequence). It would now be interesting to investigate what would be the 207 response of the newborns when the conditioned odorant is the second or the third of the 208 209 sequence (allowing to compare forward and backward pairings) to further understand how rabbit pups efficiently learn associative information about their environment. 210

Higher-order trace conditioning is thus functional in newborn rabbits, highlighting their 211 remarkable cognitive capabilities despite their relative immaturity. An important and 212 unexpected result was the equivalent backward and forward higher-order trace conditioning. 213 214 Indeed, it is classically reported that forward conditioning is more effective than backward conditioning, even for higher-order conditioning (see for instance Rescorla 1980b; Hussaini et 215 216 al., 2007), highlighting that the manner in which stimuli are presented influences their 217 integration (see for review Holmes et al., 2022). This effective backward conditioning in rabbit pups is unlikely to be related to odor contamination according to the well-controlled 218 experimental conditions (distinct recipients separated by 1 meter for each odorant in 219 ventilated room) and the fact that first-order trace conditioning was ineffective (excluding any 220 overlap between odorants). This could rather reflect a rabbit singularity compared to rodent 221 pups (or even babies) due to the ecology of the species (for review: Cuevas and Giles 2016). 222 Notably, the rabbit is to date the only species in which a pheromone (MP) emitted by lactating 223 females and involved in newborns adaptation (nipple location/grasping and milk intake) has 224 225 been described (Schaal et al. 2003; Coureaud et al. 2010). The use of the MP to induce conditioning might promote specific learning abilities, since this molecule is an extremely 226

227 powerful biological signal and reinforcer. These suggestions would require further 228 comparative studies with other species such as rats, mice or humans, to investigate neonatal 229 learning abilities in different conditioning procedures and their potential species-specificity.

230 The difference of TI - 10-sec versus 30-sec - tolerated between the two procedures used here could be related to distinct levels of arousal (Kikas et al. 2021) and/or types of association 231 involved. Indeed, in sensory preconditioning the two odorants are completely neutral during 232 their presentation, therefore triggering low levels of arousal, whereas one odorant has already 233 been reinforced in second-order conditioning, which enhances levels of arousal during 234 subsequent CS1 and CS2 presentations. Therefore, stimulus-stimulus association supports 235 236 sensory preconditioning, whereas stimulus-reward and/or stimulus-response association participates in second-order conditioning (Sharpe et al. 2017). Interestingly, these different 237 types of association may relate on different brain structures. Indeed, several experiments have 238 239 shown in adult rodents that higher-order conditioning depends on a wide brain network and that neural circuits underlying sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning differ. 240 241 For instance, manipulation of the perirhinal or the retrosplenial cortices affects stimulus-242 stimulus association during sensory preconditioning but not second-order conditioning in rats (Nicholson and Freeman 2000; Holmes et al. 2013; Robinson et al. 2014; Todd et al. 2016). 243 244 On the contrary, the basolateral amygdala is involved in second-order conditioning but not in sensory preconditioning (Hatfield et al. 1996; Blundell et al. 2003; Dwyer and Killcross 2006; 245 Parkes and Westbrook 2010). The selective recruitment of the amygdala during stimulus-246 reward and/or stimulus-response association may therefore help tolerating longer TI 247 compared to sensory preconditioning. 248

However, much less is known about neural mechanisms that mediate sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning early in life, and how these mechanisms evolve during development. Different neural circuits have been shown to support first-order

aversive learning in young and adult rats, with gradual involvement of the amygdala when the 252 animal is getting older (Shionoya et al. 2006; Raineki et al. 2009). Moreover, noradrenaline 253 depletion in the forebrain alters sensory preconditioning but not first-order aversive 254 255 conditioning in both preweanling and adult rats (Archer et al. 1986; Chen et al. 1993). Since only very limited data are available in newborns and according to age-related differences in 256 higher-order conditioning, it would be valuable to investigate the neural mechanisms and in 257 particular the neurotransmitters (using pharmacological and molecular approaches) 258 259 underlying these higher-order conditioning procedures in rabbit pups.

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Figure 1. Sensory preconditioning with two odorants. (A,B,E,F) Case of conditioning to the 379 odorant A. Newborn rabbits were sequentially exposed to (A,B) odorants A then B or (E,F)380 odorants B then A with a 10-sec (A, E) or 30-sec trace interval (TI) (B, F) on day 1 (d1), then 381 conditioned to odorant A by association with the mammary pheromone (MP) on day 2 (d2). 382 Their behavioral response to A and B, and to the MP as a control, was tested 24 h later (d3). 383 Sensory preconditioning tolerated a 10-sec TI during the preexposure phase since pups 384 responded later to A and B, but not a 30-sec TI. (C,D,G,H) Case of conditioning to the 385 odorant B. Rabbit pups were sequentially exposed to (C,D) odorants A then B or (G,H)386 odorants B then A with a 10-sec (C,G) or 30-sec TI (D,H) on d1, then conditioned to odorant 387 B by association with the MP on d2, and their behavioral response to B, A and MP was tested 388 389 on d3. Again, sensory preconditioning tolerated a 10-sec but not a 30-sec TI during the preexposure phase. (\*) P < 0.05; (\*\*\*) P < 0.001. 390

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392 Figure 2. Second-order conditioning with two odorants. (A,B,C) Case of conditioning to the odorant A and recall of A then B. Newborn rabbits were conditioned to odorant A by pairing 393 with the MP on d1, then sequentially exposed to A then B with (A) a 10-sec, (B) a 30-sec or 394 (C) a 60-sec TI on d2, before testing of their behavior to A, B, MP on day 3 (d3). Second-395 order conditioning tolerated a 10- and 30-sec TI during the second conditioning phase since 396 pups responded to B in addition to A, but not a 60-sec TI. (D,E,F) Case of conditioning to the 397 odorant A and recall of B then A. Rabbit pups were conditioned to A by pairing with the MP 398 on d1, then sequentially exposed to B then A with (D) a 10-sec, (E) a 30-sec or (F) a 60-sec 399 400 TI on d2, and tested behaviorally to A, B, MP on d3. Second-order conditioning tolerated the 10- and 30-sec TI but not the 60-sec TI during the second conditioning phase. (G,H) Case of 401

402 *conditioning to the odorant B and recall of B then A*. Rabbit pups were conditioned to B by 403 pairing with the MP on d1, then sequentially exposed to B then A with *(G)* a 30-sec or *(H)* a 404 60-sec TI on d2, and tested behaviorally to B, A, MP on d3. Second-order conditioning 405 tolerated the 30-sec TI during the second conditioning phase since pups responded to A in 406 addition to B, but not the 60-sec TI. (\*) P < 0.05; (\*\*\*) P < 0.001.

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Figure 3. Sensory preconditioning and second-order conditioning with three odorants. 408 409 (A,B,C) Case of sensory preconditioning. Newborn rabbits were exposed on d1 to the odorants A, B and C (A) simultaneously, or sequentially with (B) a 10-sec or (C) a 30-sec TI 410 between the odorants, then conditioned to odorant A by pairing with the MP on d2, and tested 411 behaviorally to A, B, C and MP on d3. Sensory preconditioning occurred simultaneously and 412 with the 10-sec TI during the preexposure phase since the pups responded to B and C in 413 414 addition to A, but not with the 30-sec TI. (D,E,F,G) Case of second-order conditioning. Pups 415 were conditioned to A by pairing with the MP on d1, then exposed to A, B and C (D) 416 simultaneously, or with (E) a 10-sec, (F) a 30-sec or (G) a 60-sec TI on d2, before behavioral 417 testing to A, B, C, MP on d3. Second-order conditioning occurred simultaneously and with the 10-sec TI, but not with the 30-sec TI during the second conditioning phase. (\*) P < 0.05; 418 (\*\*) *P* < 0.01; (\*\*\*); *P* < 0.001. 419

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Figure 1 – Coureaud, Colombel, Duchamp-Viret, Ferreira



Figure 2 – Coureaud, Colombel, Duchamp-Viret, Ferreira





