ANIMALS IN THE CLASSROOM

Considering a Classroom Pet? A classroom pet can be a fun learning experience for teachers and students.

Animals offer a great way for students to develop empathy and learn responsibility. They also have been shown to improve student performance, encourage interest in science, promote student engagement in conservation-related activities, and foster appreciation for the natural world.

While there are certainly benefits to keeping animals in the classroom, it’s important to remember that caring for another life is a huge responsibility that takes serious commitment. The following guidelines are intended to help you think through some of the factors that need to be considered before bringing in animal into the classroom.

Approval • Make sure your school administration has approved the keeping of animals in the classroom before you move forward. Every school has its own policies regarding classroom pets. Know the conditions for keeping an animal to reduce the possibility of problems later on.

Budget • Keeping an animal in the classroom can be expensive. There are cost associated with acquiring the animal, cage set-up, proper food, and medical treatment.

Animal welfare and safety • When you bring a pet into the classroom, you are making a commitment to care for its health and safety. You are the animal’s guardian. Some animal welfare considerations:

  Habitat: Providing the right habitat for your classroom pet is critical for its health and well-being. Before getting an animal, research its nutritional, space, social, light, temperature, and housing requirements and make sure your classroom conditions will accommodate these needs.

  Care and handling: Students should actively participate with adult supervision in the care of a classroom animal. Care for an animal over scheduled breaks and holidays should be the responsibility of the teacher, not the students. This helps prevent those instances when an animal is taken home by a child and then not cared for properly.
Animals should only be handled when it does not endanger its well-being and species-specific guidelines are followed. Handling of an animal should be tied to the classroom curriculum and for the safety of both the animal and student it should always be supervised by an adult.

**Veterinary Care:** The animal also needs to have access to regular and emergency veterinary care, which can be costly.

**Breeding:** Classroom pets should not be allowed to breed. Animal numbers can grow quickly causing overcrowding and stress from fighting, competition for food, and disease. Finding good homes for the offspring can also be difficult.

**Disposal:** Teachers need a plan for the eventual disposal of an animal. Unwanted animals should never be released into the wild. Animals born and raised in captivity are unlikely to survive outside of their controlled environment. Releasing classroom pets can also negatively impact the environment by introducing harmful diseases into wild populations and increasing competition with native wildlife for limited resources. The Department of Fish & Wildlife has good information about the impact of non-native species on the environment.  
http://www.dfw.state.or.us/conservationstrategy/invasive_species/docs/wildlife_in_classroom_bro.pdf

**Student Safety** • Before you get an animal, you will want to identify any student health concerns (e.g. allergies or sensitivities) that may arise because of exposure to a particular type of animal, food, or bedding material. You should avoid classroom pets if any student is immune compromised, and therefore more susceptible to zoological illnesses.

The transmission of disease (e.g. salmonella) between animals and people is always a concern. Make sure students have been instructed on proper hygiene and sanitation when caring for animals.

**Parent Involvement** • It is always a good idea to provide parents and guardians with information about the classroom pet before it is brought into the classroom. Parents should know the purpose for acquiring the animal, how its care fits into the curriculum, and a plan for how any injuries (bites, scratches) will be managed should they arise.

**Acquisition** • What is the right animal for your classroom? There are several factors you will want to consider. First, if possible choose a domestic or captive bred animal that can be acquired through an adoption center, rescue, or other re-homing opportunity. If you decide to obtain an insect or amphibian, for example, make sure that it comes from a reputable and responsible breeder and that you
have a plan of what would happen to the animal should you not be able to keep it in the classroom anymore. Avoid having animals like gerbils, hamsters, and other rodents that are nocturnal (awake during the night). The noise and lights from an active classroom interferes with their normal sleep cycle and may cause stress, biting, health problems and even early death.

**Some potential classroom “pet” species include:**

- Guinea pigs, domestic rats, domestic mice
- Insects like African millipedes, hissing cockroaches, walking sticks
- Responsibly captive-bred reptiles and amphibians such as red-footed tortoises, lizards (bearded dragons, leopard geckos), snakes (corn snakes, king snakes) and frogs (White’s tree frog, fire-bellied toad, red-eyed tree frog)
- Tropical fish that are captive-raised or collected from sustainable wild populations make good pets. Look for certification from the Marine Aquarium Council when you buy tropical fish for your aquarium. [http://www.aquariumcouncil.org/](http://www.aquariumcouncil.org/)

**Additional information on pet choices can be found through the following resources:**

- PetWatch [http://www.petwatch.net/](http://www.petwatch.net/)

Never keep animals directly caught from the wild, including locally caught frogs or snakes. Collecting may be illegal in some situations; deplete local populations; and foster an exploitative attitude in students. Teachers should always inform students of the federal, state, and local laws that prohibit collecting of animals without special permission.

When possible, try to avoid purchasing an animal from a pet store. Pet stores often sell animals that are imported from the wild. This practice has caused the decline of many species, including parrots, snakes, and lizards. It’s also important to note that many animals die between the time of collection and arrival at the pet store because of stress, rough handling, poor accommodations, and inadequate diets.

**Summary** • Remember that keeping an animal in the classroom is a serious commitment. The health and safety of these animals is completely dependent on you. Please take the time to do the necessary research so you can make an informed decision. This will help ensure a positive experience for all.