

# Should You Have a Pet in Your Classroom?

If you are thinking about adopting a classroom pet, there are several things you should consider. First, why do you want a pet in the classroom? Then, consider the practical aspects of this decision. How will this pet be cared for on a daily basis, and who will have the responsibility to do so? Finally, think long-term. If all goes well, the classroom pet will still be there at the end of the school year. What happens then?

## Why do you want to have a pet in your classroom?

Do not get a pet if your answer matches any of the following statements:

- To try to raise the interest level of your students.
- To make your classroom more attractive to the students.
- To teach kids responsibility—kids need to develop a sense of responsibility before they can be expected to care for a pet.

A pet will be a good addition to your classroom if:

- You want to share your love of animals with your students.
- You have specific learning objectives that will be better met by having an animal in the classroom rather than by other means (such as a field trip, video, guest presentation, or computer software).

It is recommended that parents be informed about the type of animal being considered. It is better to learn in advance what potential health problems your students may develop (like allergies or asthma) before acquiring the animal to avoid having to remove the pet from the classroom.

## Who will care for the pet?

You will! You are the responsible adult. You can assign pet care duties to students, but you are ultimately responsible for monitoring and follow-up. Pet care duties should be used as a reward, not as a punishment.

What about vacation time? Again, the pet is your responsibility. If you don't take it home, you must make sure that the family who "adopts" it is both committed to and knowledgeable about caring for the animal. Make sure to determine in advance who is expected to pay for veterinary care during vacations when the pet is living with a student's family. Also, clarify who can make decisions should an emergency medical situation develop.

Be aware of the "honeymoon syndrome." Caring for the animal can be seen as a reward for the first month or two and may later be perceived as a chore. Make sure that pet care and the associated learning experiences are integrated in your curriculum on a continuing basis.



## Who should be part of the decision-making?

Be sure to consult with your principal and your Animal Care Committee before bringing a pet into your classroom. The school should have the following established:

- A policy regarding classroom pets
- A plan to care for and manage the classroom animals
- A plan to respond to any parent's concerns
- A plan to deal with any student's injury or illness related to the presence of the animal in the classroom

Including your students in the decision-making process is a good way to develop a sense of "ownership" and responsibility toward the pet. As mentioned above, parents should also be made aware of the presence of the animal in the classroom.

## Health Issues

Make sure you have a plan to deal with health issues and injuries before you introduce the pet into the classroom. Make sure that substitute teachers are made aware of this plan.

- Allergies: Be aware that some students may develop allergies to the pet or bedding materials.
- Injuries: Pets can bite, scratch, or peck when handled.
- Animals may carry infectious disease agents that are transmissible to people.
- People with certain illnesses or undergoing certain treatments may be immunosuppressed and therefore more prone to acquiring infections from animals as well as from people. Individuals at greater risk for infection include transplant patients, HIV+ individuals, patients with leukemia or other cancers, and patients being treated for asthma, lupus, and other diseases. If any of your students has health problems that could be aggravated by the presence of an animal, wait until next year to bring one into your classroom.

## Other Considerations

- Make sure there is a quiet area in your classroom out of direct sunlight and drafts for the animal's living quarters.
- Make sure the temperature at night remains within an acceptable range.
- Establish a feeding and cleaning schedule, and keep records of who does what.
- Stress good hygiene. Students should wash their hands both before and after handling the animal. Children should not handle the pet when they have a cold or other illness.
- Do not breed animals in the classroom. Animal numbers can escalate quickly and cause problems due to overcrowding and stress from fighting, competition for food, chemical fumes, and bacterial contamination related to excess urine and feces. Finding good homes for the offspring is an almost impossible task.
- Animals will breed once puberty occurs, before they are fully grown. Although the animals may look young, they may be of breeding age. So if you will have more than one animal,

- don't mix the animals together in the same cage, even for short periods, until their sexes are identified. Have a knowledgeable person identify their sexes, and then keep males and females separated.
- Make sure you are ready to help your students deal with grief should the pet die or need to be euthanized.

## Learning and Pets

Animals help students develop observation skills, empathy, and respect for living things. Classroom pets can be integrated into the curriculum in many ways. For example:

- Discussion about the species' country of origin can make a social studies unit more interesting.
- Water and food consumption can be measured and charted, and growth records maintained.
- Library research can reveal stories written about animals of this species.
- Students can write their own stories about the pet and use them as an inspiration for art projects.

## Alternatives to Pets in the Classroom

It is not necessary to have a classroom pet to encourage students to learn about animals. Teachers might want to consider other options.

- Spend time with your class observing animals in the community and find out more about those species.
- Hang a bird feeder by the classroom window and identify its visitors.
- Invite local speakers to make presentations about their special interests.
- Have the class "adopt" a wild animal through a conservation group. Use conservation-related literature in classroom learning activities.

## Resources

Contact your veterinarian or a local veterinary school or veterinary technology program to get more information about this animal species.

