

Critters in the classroom

“On Thursday morning, I noticed an awful stench in the classroom. After digging around, I found that the hamster had died—several days before.”

“The children were so excited when Jaime’s family donated a lizard to our classroom. But now, they just don’t notice it. And I hate having to buy live crickets every weekend to keep it fed.”

“Bessie, our classroom rabbit, went home with Freddy over the summer. I didn’t know he has pet rabbits at home. Now Bessie is pregnant and I really don’t want to turn my classroom into a maternity ward.”

“Fish—I’m so tired of them. And the tank cleaning takes me two hours after school every week. But they are probably better than the tarantula that got out of its cage last year. There has to be a better way.”

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Typically, discussions of classroom pets bring on either warm, nurturing stories or ones like these—disasters and hassles that bring nothing positive to early care and education classrooms.

From ant colonies and earthworm farms to domestic pets and wild critters living in zoos or filmed for nature specials, animals fascinate children. And for generations, teachers have tried to maximize children’s learning potential by bringing animals into the classroom.

Teachers know that most children are eager to observe, feed, touch, and care for animals. Teachers also understand that some children are fearful and

want to observe from a respectful distance or they’re just disinterested. And, thinking that any animal is better than none, some teachers are willing to risk disaster.

But there is a better way. It involves specific learning objectives, careful planning, and respect for the diverse interests of everyone involved—children, teachers, administrators, parents, and custodians. Such a plan can make having critters in the classroom a positive and powerful experience.

Remember, classroom pets are not just another piece of equipment. Pet care and animal study contribute to broad educational goals including curiosity, compassion, and respect. Further, animal study encourages a lifelong interest in life science and ecological sensitivity.

In early childhood classrooms, pets contribute to a child’s knowledge of the natural world. Typically children learn by

- observing and describing the differences between plants and animals;
- providing the basics of animal care by supplying suitable habitats, food, water, and other needs; and
- observing animal life cycles—birth, growth, and death.

Ideally, bringing the natural animal world into the classroom is a deliberate, planned decision. When you model care and respect for animals, children will naturally follow your lead. Conversations with children about the habitat and diet of particular animals invite opportunities to explore the similarities and differences among living things.



Get everyone involved

Before getting a classroom pet, make sure you are eager, knowledgeable, and prepared. Nothing will dampen children's enthusiasm faster than a teacher's boredom or fear of an animal pet. Afraid of reptiles? Consider a gerbil or rabbit. Don't want to touch animals? Consider an aquarium with fish or newts. Clarify your own limitations before you make a commitment.

Certainly you don't need to know everything about the animal you choose—learning with children is powerful. But don't make your classroom an experiment in failed animal care because you agreed to have a pet no one can care for adequately.

As you consider pet options, review program rules. Make sure your program encourages classroom pets and has a plan in place for dealing with possible child injuries and parent concerns.

Review licensing and health regulations in your area. Some regulations, for example, forbid programs to keep turtles because they often carry salmonella. Some regional regulatory offices require a veterinarian's certification of good health for classroom animals; some animals require vaccinations.

Resist trying to make an exotic animal into a pet. Domestication is not possible, and the potential for disaster too great.

After you have limited the critter options, bring the issue to the group. Spend some time exploring the children's interests, the types of pets they may have at home, and the kinds of animals they would

like to care for. Use the following questions to guide your conversations with children.

- Where will the pet live?
- What does the pet need?
- How much will the pet cost?
- Where will we buy the pet?
- Where will we get the money for the pet, its food, and supplies?
- Who will take care of the pet?
- What will we do if the pet gets sick or injured?
- What problems will there be with this pet?
- Who will take care of the pet on the weekends and during vacations?

These questions help children understand their responsibility for another living creature—one that is totally dependent on the group for its care.

Then, with the group, develop a plan. It would include budgeting, preparing the environment for the critter, and building the animal's habitat. The plan would suggest ways to introduce the animal to the group. And it would contain charts for use in caregiving responsibilities like feeding, cage cleaning, and handling.

Housing pets

Housing for a classroom pet will depend upon the animal's needs and natural environment. For all animals, however, habitats must be safe and clean, and provide adequate space for natural movement. Most animals will also require regular (often daily) food and water.

Some classroom critters—earthworms and insects, for example—are likely to be day visitors. Provide simple, temporary housing like a clean plastic jar. Stretch a piece of nylon hosiery over the mouth of the jar and hold it in place with a rubber band. Or cut "windows" out of the sides of a milk carton, and place the whole carton in a nylon bag. Put a wet cotton ball into the container to provide moisture. Encourage children to make and record their observations, and release the animal at the end of the day.

Habitats for permanent pets must be sturdy and appropriate to the animal. Sometimes you will be able to find used cages and aquariums at tag sales and thrift stores. But remember, if the pet is a long-term investment, its housing should be too. Scrimping on housing and bedding could risk pet health and injury as well as increase the time it takes you to clean and maintain the habitat.

All animals produce wastes that must be removed

Making the choice with school-age children

School-agers may be interested in doing research into classroom pet options. Assign a particular animal or species to a child or small group of children. Tell the children that their job, like that of an advertising executive, is to "sell" the animal to the whole group.

- Ask each group to make a presentation that includes facts about the animal's natural habitat, behavior, cost, and needs in captivity.
- Invite the groups to prepare posters, skits, or puppet shows to introduce their animals.
- Allow critters to visit the classroom—restrained and with an adult handler.
- Limit the options by assigning only those animals that you find acceptable.



regularly. Water habitats for fish require air circulation and filtration systems that aerate the water and clear wastes. Daily maintenance will be limited to feeding and a check that all systems are working properly. Land animals, on the other hand, depend on people to clean their habitats as well as provide food, water, and other animal-specific needs.

For habitat and feeding specifics, consult pet care manuals available in libraries, bookstores, and pet stores.

Helping children care for pets

Help children handle classroom pets appropriately. Toddlers and young preschoolers will need to learn the meaning of words like *gently*, and *pet softly*. Teach older children how to read animal cues for hunger, tiredness, and fear.

Most animals, and all mammals, have cyclic sleep, alert, and quiet times that children can learn to respect. Teach children to leave animals alone when they are eating; even the tamest animals can be aggressive if they fear their food will be taken away.

As you and the children become more familiar with your classroom pet, continue exploring issues like pet toys, handling, habitat features, and food treats.

Vacations and weekends present challenges. Many animals require such minimal care that they can be left in the classroom over a two-day weekend. No animal can be left alone for a longer period.

Going home with a child is too often risky. Classroom pets can be injured or killed because of

rough handling, inattentive care, and jealous or undisciplined house pets. Most of the time, you will be the pet's primary caregiver—even over vacations. If the pet goes home with a child, be certain the adults in the household are eager and committed to its care.

Safety and health

Make sure you and children wash hands thoroughly before and after handling pets or anything in their habitats. Thorough hand washing is essential.

Make a plan for cleaning the habitats of land animals. Experienced children can be taught to take responsibility for this aspect of pet care. In groups of younger children you will need to include cleaning in your daily routine. Talk with the children about what you are doing and why you are taking such care. Place wastes, including old bedding, food, and feces, in a plastic bag and knot it tightly. Place the bag in an outdoor garbage can.

Some animals—like cats, rabbits and small rodents—and some wood-chip bedding cause allergic reactions. Review children's health records and your own resistance to animal allergens. For people who have allergic reactions, no amount of contact is safe. The usual cause of the allergy is dander (dried skin particles) that's in the air, not just on the animal. Skin and respiratory reactions are caused not by touching the animal but rather by breathing contaminated air.

Points to consider

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals recommends considering these points before choosing a classroom pet.

- Does the animal normally sleep during the day?
- Is the animal an excellent climber or digger?
- Can the animal easily transmit disease?
- Will the animal bite or scratch if hurt or scared?
- Is the animal too big or too small for a child to hold?
- Does the animal need quiet time to hibernate or shed skins?
- Does the animal require an extremely specialized diet involving lots of food preparation?
- Does the animal tend to require expensive habitats and medical care?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, the animal will probably not make a good classroom companion.



Some animals bite, scratch, or peck when handled—especially by inexperienced handlers. Have a plan in place for any injuries. Make sure to share your medical report forms with an injured child's parents immediately.

Children and adults whose immune systems are suppressed are at much greater risk for infections. People with suppressed immune systems often include those who have had an organ transplant, are HIV/AIDS positive, and are being treated for leukemia, other cancers, asthma, allergies, skin rashes, or lupus. If anyone in your program has a suppressed immune system, get specific medical approval before choosing a classroom pet.

Choosing a veterinarian

A veterinarian can both help you provide optimum care for a healthy animal and provide emergency care for an injured or sick pet. Make sure the veterinarian is knowledgeable about your particular pet. Many vets specialize in common domestic pets and have little experience with rodent or reptile care. Choose carefully.

Have a plan for paying veterinarian fees and your pet's emergency care. Some programs cover these costs with once-a-year fundraising; others ask parents for donations.

Death is an inevitable part of a pet's life cycle and often follows an injury. Make sure you are prepared to explain a pet's death to your class. Whenever possible, honor the dead pet with proper ceremony and burial. Don't be tempted to "buy a replacement" in the belief the children won't notice. Instead, use the pet's death to help children explore their feelings of sadness and frustration at the loss of an animal friend.

Classroom pets at a glance

Insects. Many insects, like ants, beetles, grasshoppers, praying mantis, and crickets, are interesting to observe and are easy to collect in the wild. Put a wet cotton ball in your observation box to provide moisture for the insect. At the end of the day, return the insect to the place it was found.

Long-term insect projects, like observing a silkworm's life cycle or a butterfly's metamorphosis, will require special materials and preparation.

Spiders. Spiders, including tarantulas, are not insects but rather arachnids. They can be low-maintenance, exotic pets that are interesting to watch. But

they aren't cuddly, and they bite. They are not appropriate in preschool classrooms.

Fish. Serious hobbyists and breeders spend thousands of dollars on tanks, filtration equipment, and fish. Simpler—and much less expensive—set-ups are adequate for fish pets.

Fish are calming to watch and require minimal maintenance—daily feeding and twice-a-month tank cleaning. Some fish, like Betas or Siamese fighting fish, can be kept in large bowls without filtration if there are frequent partial water changes. Most fish, however, will thrive only with a properly sized tank, filter, heater, air pump, gravel, plants, and hood light. If new, the set-up could be expensive. But odds are a parent in your program has used equipment—and set-up experience—to share. Black mollies, danios, gouramis are all easy to find and inexpensive; they make good companions in a shared tank.

Amphibians. Amphibians are cold-blooded, meaning their body temperatures are determined by the environment, not internally. They are non-scaly and may or may not have tails. They live on land and in or near water. Classroom pets include salamanders, newts, frogs, and toads. Most amphibians are carnivorous and eat worms, insects, crickets, mealy worms and commercially available Tubifex worms.

Salamanders. There are more than a hundred species of salamanders in the United States. All are tailed amphibians. The Red Eft, the juvenile form of the Red-Spotted Newt, is the most appropriate classroom pet; it lives only on land until it reaches breeding size. It is quiet, has no grooming needs, and is fascinating to observe. Salamanders need a covered, waterproof cage with small ventilation holes. Salamanders need moist environments with high humidity. Damp gravel, covered by wood bark, leaf litter, or moss ensures a high moisture level.

Frogs and toads. Frogs and toads are tail-less amphibians. Frogs generally have smooth, slimy skin, can leap, and live in moist environments. Toads tend to be larger, drier, and bumpy, and live in dry places. Both are hearty, quiet, and interesting to watch; neither should be handled. Most frogs and toads need tall terrariums with branches and leafy plants (that you mist daily), and a secure, ventilated lid. Provide hollow logs and rocks that make hiding places. Additionally, frogs need a water dish and a moister environment than toads.

Reptiles. Reptiles, including snakes, turtles, and lizards, are cold-blooded. They are quiet, thrive in easy-to-maintain habitats, don't require handling, and are exotic animals to observe. All reptiles need clean, draft-free cages equipped with a water bowl, hiding place, and an inclined climbing surface like a sturdy tree branch. A light hanging above the cage will provide adequate warmth. The reptile will move up and down the tree branch to warmer or cooler areas of the cage. Most reptiles carry salmonella and may be barred from early childhood classrooms. If you choose a reptile pet, be especially careful with cage hygiene and hand-washing routines.

Snakes. Snakes are carnivores (some require live food like crickets, fish, and small rodents). A snake vivarium or cage should be big enough to provide one-half square foot of space for every foot of snake length. Glass-sided aquariums, plastic storage bins, and purchased cages should have screened lids for ventilation. The floor covering should be newspaper, gravel, outdoor carpeting, or shredded wood chips (not cedar). Non-venomous king snakes, garter snakes, and corn snakes are the most popular pets.

Turtles. Shelled reptiles—turtles, tortoises, and terrapins—are aquatic, semi-aquatic, or terrestrial. They are quiet and non-demanding and don't need handling. They can live a long time. Common varieties are inexpensive. However, food and veterinary costs combined with salmonella risk and the time needed for weekly cage cleaning make turtles an undesirable classroom pet.

Lizards. Many types of lizards are available as pets, but only the green anole or chameleon is recommended for early childhood classrooms. Chameleons are fun to watch because they change colors according to the environment or mood, and they are easy to care for. Chameleons have a short life span. They eat small bugs and flies, and have claws and scales. Males are territorial and will fight with others in the same enclosure. Habitat requirements include a terrarium or a tall, transparent plastic container fitted with a screened lid that provides ventilation and minimizes moisture build-up. Include a few plants and branches for climbing, and a heat source that keeps the temperature close to 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Mist the plants daily to provide droplets of water for drinking. Geckos, iguanas, and skinks are less desirable classroom pets because of size and maintenance requirements.

Birds. Birds are social animals with long life spans—parrots can live to be 60 years old! Research the type of bird you are considering and choose one that can be caged. A free-flying bird is not appropriate in early childhood classrooms. Listen to the bird's song before you buy. Bird vocalizations can significantly raise the decibel level of a classroom. Most birds require a calm environment, specialized diet, and housing that allows them to move freely. Birds can nip exploring fingers and carry illnesses that can be transmitted to humans. They are messy eaters, they molt regularly, and they are sensitive to air pollutants including aerosol cleaners and insecticides. If you choose a bird as a classroom pet, consider canaries, finches, or parakeets—all easy care and child friendly.

Small rodents. Small rodents are perhaps the most common classroom pets. Mice, rats, gerbils, hamsters, and guinea pigs fall into this category. They are relatively inexpensive and quiet. They take up little space, don't mind being left alone, and tolerate children's attention. Each rodent has particular needs, but all need an appropriate cage, food, water, and cage features that support their natural behaviors. Never use cedar bedding for rodents. Cedar chips are abrasive and not absorbent. Cedar oils can cause respiratory and liver illnesses. Many small rodents are nocturnal and can become irritable when their rest periods are interrupted. Rodents need to chew. Be sure their cages are sturdy and free from harmful materials. Provide gravity-flow bottles for water—bowls of water will be fouled with food, bedding, and urine. All rodents are susceptible to fleas and mites.

Mice. Mice are self-grooming, small, and easily tamed. They have short life spans (less than two years) and can breed at the age of two months. A male's urine odor is strong and unpleasant. A cage with a pull-out bottom makes cleaning efficient. Never pick up a mouse by the tail. Mice eat special seed mix or pellets, fresh vegetables, grains, and small amounts of clover or dandelion greens. Because they are nocturnal, they may be less interesting in the classroom than other small rodents.

Gerbils. Gerbils are larger than mice and smaller than rats. They are playful in the daytime, self-grooming, and hearty. They can be tamed and live for three to four years. Gerbils don't like being solitary pets, and may be too active for children to handle easily. Because they gnaw, plastic cage additions

like Hamster Habitrail® environments are not appropriate. Gerbils don't drink much water and urinate little. They can breed at three months, have a gestation period of less than four weeks, and may mate for life. Feed gerbils a special seed mix with supplements of apple, corn, raisins, and peas.

Guinea pigs. Adult guinea pigs are kitten-sized, gentle, and live for about eight years. Guinea pigs are not climbers or jumpers and don't have tails. They do have toenails that need clipping unless they have access to rough surfaces. Guinea pigs need a diet rich in vitamin C because, unlike other rodents, they can't synthesize it. Prepared guinea pig pellets contain vitamin C but additional treats like kale, parsley, orange slices, and strawberries are appropriate. Avoid feeding your guinea pig high-fat foods, including nuts. Guinea pigs can breed when two months old; they can be neutered. Their pups are born with fur and teeth and their eyes open.

Rats. Although often feared, rats rate as great pets. They are clean, intelligent, and easily tamed, and they respond readily to humans—including children. Rats can be trained to recognize their names, perform tricks, and use a litter box. Like all rodents, rats are susceptible to fleas and mites. Rats need specially formulated pellets as well as nuts, carrots, apples, and raisins. A rat cage must be cleaned at least once a week. Rats are fertile throughout the year; litters range between six and 22 pups. Consider having a classroom rat spayed or neutered.

Hamsters. Hamsters are happy as solitary pets. They are small (about 5 inches long) and quiet. They are the most likely of all rodents to bite. They sleep during the day, scatter litter, and are susceptible to colds as well as fleas and mites. Hamsters need an exercise wheel or treadmill and a nesting box in their cage. Their diet is composed of special pellets and a variety of fresh and dried fruit and vegetables. Hamsters are food hoarders and hide food in their cages. They are prolific breeders: a single pair can multiply in a year into 100,000 offspring. An adult hamster can squeeze through a quarter-size opening and, once loose from its cage, is not likely to return. These habits may make hamsters less interesting and more difficult to care for than other small rodent choices.

Ferrets. Ferrets are related to minks, polecats, badgers, skunks, and otters. They are strictly regulated in many locales and are not appropriate as classroom pets.

Rabbits. Rabbits can be good-natured, affectionate, and child-friendly pets. As indoor classroom pets, they need large cages with solid, removable floors. They need a heavy, ceramic food dish, gravity-flow water bottle, bedding, a litter box, and toys. As outdoor pets, they need a hutch with a sheltered nest box and protection from sun, rain, and wind; they also need fresh water daily. Rabbits have powerful back legs for jumping. With inappropriate or tentative handling, their backs can be broken by the force of their own kick. Commercially prepared food pellets are the best rabbit food, but occasional treats like broccoli, carrots, kale, and dandelion greens are appropriate. Angora rabbits have 3-inch-long fur that requires special grooming. Angoras are not recommended as classroom pets.

Resources

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