

Animals in Schools

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Fact Sheet

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Introduction

The simple idea of holding animals in school classrooms can polarise opinion and stimulate debate. For some, this is an unnecessary imposition on the welfare of animals, while others believe that the mere presence of animals in a classroom can enrich the lives of both students and the animals themselves. The idea that children need to be made aware of the important issues associated with the care and welfare of animals does however seem to receive almost unanimous support.

For some school age children living in the cities of Australia and New Zealand, the presence of a classroom pet or equivalent might be the only positive interaction they have with animals during their formative years, so it can be an important aspect of their education. However, careful consideration for the welfare of animals in schools – whether a goldfish in the classroom or farm animals in an Agricultural Secondary School; is essential.

School classrooms can be empty and silent for extended periods but can also be hubs of excitement that occasionally verge on pandemonium. During the school day, environmental conditions are usually maintained at within a comfortable temperature range, while at nights or out of school hours temperatures and humidity levels may fluctuate enormously. So there are a lot of factors to consider before deciding to bring an animal into any school.

Teacher responsibilities

Teachers are powerful role models and the way they work with animals and the attitudes that are apparent in the teachers' care and handling of animals will strongly influence the attitudes students develop towards animals.

Teachers should involve students in the process of decision making about whether to keep an animal at school and what species or breed would be most suitable.

Here are some questions and notes that may be useful when considering whether to keep an animal at school.

Why do you need an animal in your classroom? Are there alternatives?

It is important to be clear about the educational outcomes that are to be achieved by using any animal in your classroom. The outcomes may be syllabus specific or broader and pastorally directed.

It is essential that the decision to use animals in the classroom has been thoroughly researched and considered. There may be practical and appropriate alternatives to keeping an animal in the classroom. What may seem like a fun or exciting way to engage students is also a 365 day a year responsibility!

It is also important that research has been done and consideration given about the species of animal that may be used in the classroom. It is essential that the teacher and students understand the needs of the chosen species and /or breed of animal prior to its acquisition and are sure they will be able to meet its needs. This includes understanding both the physical and behavioural requirements of the chosen species. Consideration needs to be given about whether the animal is a solitary animal or an animal that naturally lives in a group. An animal kept in a school, experiences extremes in their environment, sometimes crowded and noisy while at others quiet and solitary.

How will you know if the animal is physically and behaviourally healthy?

It is important for any animal owner to be aware of what is normal behaviour for their animal. This assists the owner to make judgements about the animal's health and to know when the animal is sick, injured or stressed.

As well as their physical needs it is important to consider animals' behavioural needs. Mice and rats are social animals and in general they should not be kept as solitary animals. If breeding is not desired then they are best kept in single sex groups made up of compatible individuals.

Environmental enrichment may be an important consideration for the selected animal. This needs to be appropriate for the chosen species.

Are there particular licensing requirements or conditions relating to the keeping to particular animals in your state or territory?

Licences are required to keep many native animal species. These licensing requirements vary between individual states and territories. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service have issued schools with a licence that allows teachers to collect up to 20 tadpoles. When these

tadpoles undergo metamorphosis to become frogs they should be released back to their original source. This will reduce the chance of spreading disease among frog colonies. There may be similar licensing in some other states but the teacher must become familiar with them and be compliant.

It is essential that prior to collecting or purchasing or even accepting as a donation any native animal, you contact the state agency that administers the licences for native animals. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking the law.

The National Livestock Identification Scheme requires property identification, tagging and logging of livestock movements throughout Australia, including cattle, sheep and goats.

Equivalent information in other jurisdictions and some relevant examples can be found at the following web sites:

Victoria:

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/plants-and-animals/native-plants-and-animals/keeping-and-trading-wildlife-in-victoria/wildlife-in-schools>

Queensland:

<http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildlife/permits-licences/index.html>

ACT:

http://www.tams.act.gov.au/parks-recreation/plants_and_animals/animal_licensing

South Australia:

http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/Plants_Animals/Permits_licences

Tasmania:

<http://www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/SJON-572UUU?open>

Western Australia:

<http://www.dec.wa.gov.au/management-and-protection/animals/fauna-management/fauna-licensing.html>

Northern Territory
<http://parksandwildlife.nt.gov.au/permits/permits/#.URswq8jFmSo>

What will happen when you don't need the animal anymore?

Planning is important before any animal is acquired.

Eggs will hatch into chickens that will need suitable homes for the rest of their lives. It is essential that homes for the chickens have been organised before acquiring the eggs. This includes homes for any roosters that hatch.

The life span of the animal needs to be taken into account prior to acquisition and must be considered when planning for their on-going care.

Who will provide care on weekends and holidays?

It is essential that animals are cared for seven days a week. To ensure that school animals are cared for over weekends and holidays, they may be taken home by students, provided that the teacher gains;

- Written permission from the parent or caregiver
- Evidence that the parent or caregiver understands the needs of the pet.

If students do take an animal home, then parents must be made aware of the pet's needs. It is not enough to tell the student, parents or caregivers should be given guidance and advice about the pet's needs for the duration of the stay. These should be written and include information about normal and abnormal behaviours and signs and symptoms of illness.

It is important that the school pet is kept safe from any home pets, eg. The school mouse

should only be kept in a room where the home cat cannot go.

If students take the animal home, how will it be transported?

Every effort should be made to decrease the time that the pet is in a car, particularly during summer. It is also important that contents of the pet's cage are either removed or secured so that they cannot move around the cage and injure the pet during transit.

Do you have the principal's permission for a school visit?

It is essential that the school principal is supportive of the program that involves any animal kept by the school. In some states there is legislation that affects whether particular animals are even allowed on school grounds. For example, in NSW the *Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) states that dogs are prohibited from school grounds unless there is permission from the school principal. This includes pets for news items, the family dog accompanying a parent to collect a student or visits by service animals.

Is the animal(s) included in the school's plans in the event of an emergency or disaster?

It is important that all staff members know about the location of any animals kept in the school. For this reason, advice about school animals should be included in the school's evacuation and emergency plans.