

Animals in the Early Learning Environment Procedure

Purpose

This explains how to provide a healthy, safe environment for children and staff when animals are part of the classroom curriculum.

Guidance

Animals can be excellent companions for children and adults. They can help to meet their emotional needs and caring for animals can give children the opportunity to learn gentleness. They can learn as well as about life, death and responsibility, but these benefits come with some risks. Animals can present serious health risks to young children. Young children tend to be more susceptible to diseases and parasites than adults because of their immature immune systems and because they tend to frequently put their hands in their mouths.

Procedure

Early Head Start

Animals are not allowed in rooms that are used by infants and toddlers. (Exception: Service animals)

Head Start/ECEAP

Planning for an Animal

- Consult with your Health/Nutrition/Safety Coach.
- Obtain a consent form from all parents. Consent must be unanimous before the animal is housed in the classroom.
- Develop an animal care plan to include:
 - Feeding schedule and cleaning regimen
 - Weekend, holiday, disaster and vacation plans
 - Designated staff person and alternate staff person responsible for the care of the animal.
 - Plans for disposal of the animal in the event of its death.
- Hold a center team meeting to discuss the purpose of the pet and to plan how it will be part of the learning environment.

Before Housing an Animal in the Classroom

- Notify all parents that an animal will be housed in the classroom either upon enrollment of the child or before an animal is purchased during the school year.
- Find out if any children are fearful of animals, are allergic to animals, or if an animal might trigger an asthma attack.
- Obtain information on the care, handling and housing of the animal from a pet store, library or a Veterinarian.
- Post a hand washing procedure poster by the animal.
- Tell volunteers custodians and any pregnant woman there is an animal in the classroom.

Documentation to have on premises

- Name and contact information of the person responsible for the animal when class is not in session.
- Veterinarian's phone number.
- Animal care documents.
- Name of the commercial pet store where the animal was purchased.

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Once an animal is housed in classroom

Instruct children on safe procedures to follow when they are close to animals.

A designated staff person must be assigned to be responsible for the care and treatment of the animal at all times, including during All Hazard Drills and disasters.

Care of animals

- Provide appropriate food and water.
- Clean and disinfect animal containers and cages weekly or more often as needed (clean and disinfect immediately if animal odors are evident).
- Clean and disinfect cages, litter boxes and containers in a designated utility area-**not** around child areas.
- Do not allow animals to use the children's play areas inside or outside as a restroom.
- Make sure all containers or cages are constructed to prevent debris from spilling out.
- Do not hang containers or cages in corridors, entryways or over where children eat, sleep or play.
- Schedule time when the animal is to be left alone.
- If an animal shows signs of illness, remove it from the classroom until it has been seen by a veterinarian and given approval to return to the classroom.

Handling animals

A child's contact with animals must always be directly supervised by staff.

- A staff person must be close enough to remove the child immediately if the child or animal shows signs of distress or if the child shows signs of treating the animal inappropriately.
- Children must be in small groups (3 or 4 children) when interacting with the animal.
- Only trained animals that tolerate handling can interact with children.
- Do not allow children to walk around with the animal. Handling must occur while child is seated.
- Children are not allowed to feed pets directly from their hands.
- Do not allow children to have animals in close contact with their face.
- Adults and children must wash hands with soap and water before and after handling animals and after touching cages/containers where the animal is kept. Instant hand sanitizers and waterless gels are not to be used for this purpose.

Steps to Cleaning and Disinfecting Animal Cages/ Containers

The area around the animal must be kept clean at all times and disinfected at least once a day or more often if necessary. Children are not allowed to clean up any form of animal waste.

Staff will bring the animal to the utility area or place the animal in a temporary cage or container and bring the cage/container to the utility area.

- Clean and disinfect the utility sink and counter.
- Wash hands and put on gloves.
- Wet debris then clean it out with small dust pan and brush. Do not use a vacuum to clean cages!
- All debris and waste must be discarded in a plastic bag, tied and placed in the garbage.
- Clean the container/cage using soap and water.
- Rinse the cage/container with water.
- Disinfect using a bleach solution (1 tablespoon of bleach to a quart of water).
- Air dry before returning the animal to the cage/container.
- Clean and disinfect the sink, faucet and counter.
- Remove gloves and wash hands.
- Return the pet to the container or cage.
- Wash hands.

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Death of Animal

If the animal dies, contact your local Health Department for information about the proper disposal of its remains.

Animals Visiting Classroom

Before the animal visits:

- Consult with your Health/Nutrition/Safety Coach.
- Obtain a consent form from all parents. Consent must be unanimous before the animal can visit in the classroom.
- Find out if any children are fearful of animals or if an animal might trigger an asthma attack or allergic reaction.
- No animal showing signs of illness will be allowed to visit.
- The Center Director must designate the area where the animal will be allowed
 - No areas where children play, eat, or sleep
 - No food preparation areas
- Consult your Health/Nutrition/Safety Coach for a Parent Notification form prior to placing service animals in the classroom.

Dogs Visiting the Classroom: (dogs are not allowed to be resident in the classroom)

Visiting dogs (including service animals) must:

- Be at least 12 months old.
- Meet local requirements for vaccinations and licensing.
- Be free of parasites: internal (hook, tape roundworms etc.) and external (fleas, ticks etc.)
- Have their owner share name and phone of veterinarian who provides ongoing care.
- Not be allowed to roam unrestrained in the classroom.
- Be determined not to be in “heat” at the time of the visit.
- Have proof of current rabies vaccination.
- Have a statement from a veterinarian that the dog is in good health at the time of visit.
- Have proof of completion of professional behavior training or be part of a registered Delta Society Pet Partner Team*

*The Delta Society Pet Partners Program

The Delta Society Pet Partners Program trains volunteers and screens volunteers and their pets for visiting animal programs in hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, schools and other facilities. It is the only national program that requires volunteer training and screening of animal/handler teams.

Delta’s decision to set an age limit that visiting dogs must be one year or older is based on the following:

- Puppies are very fragile. Animals under 12 weeks old do not have fully developed immune systems. Prolonged stress can lead to an immune system crash and subsequent illness.
- Puppies are prone to soiling or may vomit in their carriers. This not only makes the animal unhappy and unsuitable for the day’s visiting, but also may condition the animal to become anxious whenever traveling.
- If puppies are part of a shelter, spending time away from the shelter can reduce the animal’s opportunities for being adopted. Also, adoptable animal’s behavior and health histories are generally unknown or incomplete.
- Puppies play “bite and scratch” and are not fully controllable and predictable which puts clients at risk and facilities liable.

Fish tanks

Fish in a properly installed and maintained aquarium are allowed. Tanks must be secured from falling and cannot be located in corridors, entrance ways or where children eat, sleep or play.

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Care of Fish:

- Follow an aquarium start up plan.
- Provide appropriate food and feeding schedule.
- Prevent fish disease through a regular schedule that includes:
 - Attention to sanitation, water quality and a stable environment
 - Proper nutrition and avoidance of over-feeding
 - Plan for introduction of fish to the environment.
- Replace evaporated water regularly.

Classroom Safety:

- Electrical
 - Use well-grounded power strips
 - UL compliant, quality equipment
 - Ground fault outlets
- Always unplug all electrical units before moving or repairing the aquarium.
- Always unplug heater before and after any water exchange.
- Broken glass
 - Avoid using glass measuring cups or bowls.
 - Use caution when adding rocks or moving the aquarium.

Steps for Cleaning and Disinfecting Fish Tanks: (Children are not allowed to participate in the cleaning of tanks.)

Water Exchange:

To prevent ammonia toxicity and fish kills, efficient filtration and periodic water exchanges is the key to water quality.

- Weekly water exchanges are necessary.
- Follow a calculated schedule of replacement for evaporation.
- Obtain specific instructions from a commercial aquarium dealer to maintain the appropriate water to mineral balance in the tank.
- Keep good records!

Gravel Cleaning:

Urine, respiratory waste and uneaten food will build up in the tank.

- Clean the bottom of the tank every one to two weeks to remove visible waste.
- Perform all cleaning operations when children are not in attendance.
- Always wash hands and wear gloves.
- Use a siphon tube to remove waste from the gravel in the tank.
- Collect waste and water in a bucket.
- Only remove 25% of the water volume in the tank.
- Replace lost water with conditioned water.
- Dispose of waste water in a utility sink outside of the classroom or restrooms.
- Clean and disinfect the utility sink
- Remove gloves and wash hands

Filter Cleaning:

Depending on the type of filter and amount of water, the filter will need cleaning at least monthly.

Consult with a commercial aquarium dealer.

Never use detergents, soaps or chlorine bleach to clean fish tanks.

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Family Child Care

Animals in Family Child Care present a special set of circumstances. WAC 170-296-0770 must be followed for family child care homes.

The WAC states that:

- All pets that have access to children, whether kept indoors or outside, must be in good health, show no evidence of disease and be non-aggressive.
- Dogs and cats must have the required immunizations.
- All pet wastes must be disposed of daily and litter boxes kept inaccessible to children at all times.
- There must be an area separate from the outdoor play space for animals to relieve themselves.
- Staff must always be present when children play with pets.
- Parents must be informed of the presence of a pet before enrolling the child and complete the consent form.

Potential Health Concerns Associated with Common Animals

Animals Potentially Implicated	Description	Health Concern
Animals with fur or feathers	Individuals may have allergies to certain animals. Often the allergy is toward the dander of the animal. Animal dander is also a trigger for some individuals with asthma.	Allergies
Most animals	Many animals can bite. Aggressive animals should not be kept at child care facilities due to the risk for injury. Germs can be passed from the animal and can infect the bite area.	Biting
Cats	Also called Bartonellosis, these bacteria cause fever, fatigue, and swollen lymph nodes. Cats can carry the bacteria and show no signs of illness.	Cat Scratch Fever
Reptiles, amphibians, cats, dogs, farm animals, birds, hedgehogs, ducks, chickens, chicks, wild animals	Several bacteria and parasites animals may carry can be passed to people and cause gastrointestinal illness. Some of these include Salmonella, Campylobacter, Cryptosporidium, E. coli O157:H7, and Giardia. Symptoms may include diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, stomach cramps, or fever. Many reptiles are carriers of Salmonella and show no symptoms. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommends against having pet reptiles in child cares or homes where children under age 5 reside.	Diarrheal Illnesses
Dogs, cats, rodents, hedgehogs, farm animals	May be carried by animals and transferred to humans. Ticks may carry Lyme Disease or Rocky Mountain Spotted fever that can be passed to humans. Fleas can cause itching, allergic reactions, and may spread some illnesses.	Fleas and ticks
Dogs and cats, especially puppies and kittens	Several types of parasites cause hookworm infections. In the intestines, hookworms can cause bleeding and abdominal pain.	Hookworm
Dogs, wild animals including rodents	A bacterial disease that can cause flu-like symptoms in humans. Life-threatening illness can result from infections of vital organs such as the liver, brain, lung, or heart. It is spread through the urine of infected animals.	Leptospirosis
Fish, amphibians, birds	Bacterial infections that can be passed to humans, especially individuals with compromised immune systems.	Mycobacterial infection
Rabbits	Carried by most rabbits, this bacterium may cause an infection of a bite or a scratch	Pasteurella bacteria

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Animals Potentially Implicated	Description	Health Concern
Birds of the parrot family (parakeets, cockatiels, parrots, lovebirds, etc.), doves, pigeons, turkeys, ducks, occasionally canaries or finches	Also called Parrot Fever, this respiratory disease can be spread to humans. It causes symptoms like the flu, usually with a dry cough and a fever. It can lead to pneumonia and other complications in humans.	Psittacosis
Dogs, raccoons, bats, skunks, occasionally other mammals	A severe viral disease that affects the central nervous system. Rabies is fatal to humans once symptoms start. Many dogs, cats, and horses are given routine rabies vaccines to protect them from the disease.	Rabies
Wild animals including prairie dogs	Some uncommon illness may be carried by animals and have the potential to be transmitted to humans. For example, some prairie dogs have been shown to carry plague or monkey pox. Do not keep wild animals as pets.	Rare Diseases
Dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, rats, horses, goats, cows, pigs	Caused by fungus and affecting the skin and scalp by producing a ring-shaped rash or dry, scaly area. Transmitted by contact with an infected animal's skin or hair.	Ringworm
Dogs, cats, farm animals, wild animals	An intestinal parasite that can be transmitted from animals to humans through the pet's feces. Puppies are more likely to have infections than older dogs, although many pets show no signs of infection. Roundworm eggs may be found in feces; feces should be kept off playgrounds.	Roundworm
Dogs, cats	A parasite that lives in the intestinal tract of animals. Can be passed to humans.	Tapeworms
Cats	A parasite that is shed in the feces of cats. Toxoplasmosis is of concern to pregnant women and individuals with compromised immune systems.	Toxoplasmosis

Resources

See Animals in the Early Learning Environment Resources in the Health, Nutrition, Safety HUB