

Leave Animals out of the Classroom

Animals in the classroom: Issues and Alternatives

[Adapted from an article by the World Society for the Protection of Animals]

At the end of every school year, shelters across the country are inundated with hamsters, mice, rabbits, gerbils, fish, guinea pigs, and reptiles that are no longer needed or wanted in the classroom. Many teachers believe keeping an animal in the classroom is a good way to foster responsibility, teach respect, or raise awareness about animals. But the learning environment can turn sour when the classroom pet becomes too big a burden and must be surrendered to the local animal shelter. Despite teacher's good intentions, keeping a classroom pet puts the animals at serious risk for neglect and substandard care.

Once animals are in the classroom, important aspects of their nature are ignored completely. For example, hamsters and most small animals are nocturnal, yet they are kept in brightly lit classrooms and removed from their cages during the day. Birds tend to be sensitive to drafts and changes in air temperature, but climate control is normally regulated by the students' comfort levels, not the animals' needs. Furthermore, animals are removed from their habitat, and placed in cages.

Classroom pets are often neglected during school breaks and holidays. Many suffer from missed meals, unsanitary living conditions and lack of climate control. If left alone for a weekend, pets can be literally starving or dehydrated come Monday morning. A fire or power outage can also be deadly to an animal that is left alone in a building overnight or on weekends.

Animals' health can also be compromised when caregivers fail to address their nutritional needs. Inadequate veterinary care also leads to failed health of classroom pets. Many animals actually die in classroom environments, which is not only a terrible fate for the animals but a devastating experience for the students.

Filling the role of classroom pet or mascot can be extremely stressful on an animal. Going from five days of noise to two days of isolation is particularly traumatic and confusing. Constant poking and handling can also be taxing on an animal.

Furthermore, keeping animals in a classroom poses serious health risks for students. Recently there have been reports of Salmonella, caused by having reptiles in the classroom. Students with asthma and or allergies can be adversely affected by the presence of an animal in the classroom.

Fostering responsibility and teaching respect are important components of a child's educational and personal development. Classroom pet duties, however, are not an appropriate method for instilling values. The learning process is inherently filled with mistakes and failures, which are appropriate in normal life circumstances but is it fair to allow a mistake by a child to result in the suffering of a dependent animal?

There are far more constructive ways to learn about living beings than by keeping animals in the classroom. Here are some suggested alternatives:

- Observe animals in their natural surroundings.
- Sponsor an animal in its environment.
- Take a trip to an animal wildlife rehabilitation center.
- Bring an animal specialist in.
- Take a virtual reality tour of an animal's habitat.
- Bring animals into the classroom through books, magazines, etc.