

Classroom Critters: To Be or Not to Be?

By Rebecca Simmons

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<http://www.bhg.com/pets/care/family-pet/classroom-critters-to-be-or-not-to-be/>

Any parent who has answered their child's pleas of, "Can we get a pet?" by adopting an animal knows that caring for even the smallest critter is not an easy task.

Yet thousands of classrooms across the country have their very own mascot-animals sometimes subjected to substandard care; animals who might pose health risks to students.

But animals in the classroom don't always mean trouble; educators and parents can both play a role in caring for the pets, minimizing the risks, and giving students a firsthand look at how to treat animals humanely.

Choosing Carefully

As with any pet, educators need to do their research before bringing an animal into their classroom. While certain types of animals can make good classroom pets, many species are ill-suited to living in a school environment.

"A range of problems can arise when teachers fail to research a particular animal's needs and behavior," says Heidi O'Brien, communications coordinator for the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE). "For example, birds tend to be sensitive to drafts and changes in air temperature. Hamsters are nocturnal and may be sleeping during the school day."

Many animals are never appropriate pets, including reptiles like lizards, snakes and turtles, and other wild animals like chinchillas, frogs, hedgehogs, and prairie dogs. Birds, rabbits, and hamsters can make good pets in the home, but are not well-suited to life in a classroom. However, some small rodents and goldfish can adapt well to school life and are relatively easy to care for.

"Guinea pigs, mice, rats, gerbils and goldfish can make suitable classroom pets if the teacher assumes responsibility for the animal's care and acts as a humane role model—a responsible caregiver who sets and enforces rules for how students treat animals in class," says Kelly Connolly, issues specialist for the Companion Animals section of The HSUS.

Potential Problems

In addition to carefully choosing a suitable animal for their classroom, teachers need to address potential health concerns. "There can be some health risks for students, such as Salmonella carried by reptiles, and asthma, allergies, or other conditions that could be aggravated by the presence of animals," says O'Brien.

Choosing a suitable classroom pet that poses few health concerns still requires a commitment that some teachers may not be willing to make. Even responsible adults often underestimate the amount of time, money, and dedication needed to care for a pet.

"Classroom pet care should be no different than caring for a pet in your own home," says Connolly. "Someone needs to be the responsible caregiver."

“One common problem is when a teacher does not adopt the class pet as his or her own and assume ultimate responsibility for the animal's care,” says O'Brien. “If left in the classroom when school is not in session, the animal may suffer from lack of climate control, missed meals, lack of water or a dirty living environment. The best way to avoid these problems is for the teacher to take the pet home when school is out. Doing so not only helps ensure proper care, but shows students that caring for an animal is an important, full-time commitment.”

Classroom Check-up

Parents can determine if their child's classroom pet is being cared for properly by talking with their child or child's teacher, or by visiting the animal.

“If you feel the teacher is providing proper care and acting as a humane role model, thank him or her for providing your child with an opportunity to learn about animals' needs and behaviors, and to develop a sense of responsibility and empathy for animals,” says O'Brien.

But, says O'Brien, if you feel that care is lacking or that the teacher is not sending a humane message to students, you can provide him or her with pet care information from www.hsus.org and recommend humane education programs and materials, such as those provided by NAHEE, available at www.nahee.org

“Be sure to offer help in a friendly, constructive way,” says O'Brien. “If a teacher admittedly cannot meet an animal's needs, you can offer to help find a home for the pet or recommend local animal sheltering agencies. If animal welfare suffers and no action is being taken by the teacher, you can contact the school principal or local animal control agency.”

Parents can direct educators who are thinking about acquiring a classroom pet to a NAHEE brochure entitled “Is a Classroom Pet for You?” Providing a teacher with a copy of the brochure can help communicate the challenges of adding a critter to the classroom. The brochure includes suggestions for alternative ways to teach children about animals and pet care, such as subscribing to KIND News, NAHEE's classroom newspaper that teaches students in grades K-6 kindness and respect for people, animals, and natural habitats.

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