

Exotic Pets in the Classroom: What's Best for Kids?

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Pets and kids — for many of us they go hand in hand. I can't imagine growing up without a pet. Pets teach children so many important lessons: how to responsibly care for another living thing, how to love unconditionally, and how to deal with life and death. I am always saddened when I hear a child doesn't or can't have a pet. That's where the classroom pet comes in. Although certain schools have rules about what kinds of pets can be housed in the classroom based on allergies, exposure to infection, local laws, etc., I am constantly asked what animals make the best classroom pets. Of course, the short answer depends on what type of animal — scaly, feathered or furred — the kids and teachers are most interested in. The long answer is that there are three types of pets I readily recommend for the classroom.

1. Classroom-Friendly Reptiles

Reptiles can make great classroom pets because they are quiet and interesting to watch and generally live a long time. The simplest reptiles to start with are leopard geckos, bearded dragons, and corn snakes. All are fairly docile and remain relatively small. They are colorful and fairly simple to take care of as far as reptiles go. In comparison to small mammals or birds that have very high metabolisms and require daily feeding, these reptiles have slow metabolisms and can generally go a couple of days without eating. The benefit of that is, if they are healthy, they need not be fed over the typical two-day weekend when school is closed.

Like all reptiles, these kid-friendly species have specific light and heat requirements and must be fed specific diets in order to remain healthy. All should be provided with ultraviolet (UV) light for several hours a day. This allows them to make adequate vitamin D in their skin to help them absorb essential nutrients from their food. Leopard geckos are insectivores; they eat insects like mealworms and crickets. Bearded dragons are omnivores; they eat some vegetation, as well as insects. Corn snakes are carnivores; they eat mice. Diet, therefore, may be very important when selecting a species for the classroom.

All reptiles also require multivitamin supplementation and exposure to water so they can soak and stay hydrated for proper skin shedding. They also need paper-based, digestible bedding in their tanks so that they can bury, dig and hide without caregivers having to worry about their pets' gastrointestinal tracts becoming obstructed if they ingest the material. These animals also need rocks and branches on which to climb and covered areas in which to hide.

Salmonella Concerns

All reptiles carry salmonella bacteria, so anyone who touches these pets must wash their hands afterward. Keeping a pump bottle of hand sanitizer next to the tank is a great way to remind kids that they need to clean up immediately after touching these pets.

During school vacations of more than a couple of days, particularly if the temperature of the classroom drops, these animals should go home with a teacher or family. They should travel to their vacation home with their

complete tank set up, including lights and food, so that they can be properly cared for. Reptiles that are left behind in cold classrooms are more likely to develop infections and other illnesses, as their immune system function, metabolism and digestion all slow in response to lower temperatures.

2. Guinea Pigs Get an "A"

Hands down, the mammal I recommend most as a classroom pet is the guinea pig. Guinea pigs are hardy, fairly long-lived (five to seven years) rodents that can be safely handled by most children under adult supervision. They tend to be friendly, interactive animals that are active during the day, making them great for kids to watch and hold. When socialized properly and handled gently, guinea pigs don't usually bite or scratch. They are fairly low-maintenance, requiring daily of guinea pig pellets, unlimited amounts of grass hay, a small amount of vegetables and fresh water.

While young guinea pigs that are building bones can be fed alfalfa hay, alfalfa-based pellets and high-calcium-containing greens (such as parsley, kale, spinach, dandelion and others), adult guinea pigs should be offered only timothy-hay-based pellets, timothy (or other lower-calcium) hay and low-calcium greens (such as green and red leaf lettuce, romaine, endive, or Boston or Bibb lettuce). Guinea pigs also must be given vitamin C tablets daily, as their bodies do not make it. Without vitamin C they can develop cartilage abnormalities that can affect the development of their joints and teeth, and these abnormalities can be quite painful. To prevent them, give the guinea pig a daily vitamin C tablet (which can be purchased commercially). Giving the classroom guinea pig its daily dose of C can be a fun job for students and can help remind them about how to responsibly care for a pet.

Guinea pigs can be housed in easy-to-clean, plastic-bottomed cages lined with paper-based bedding that can either be purchased in pet stores or provided as shredded paper or newspaper from any typical office paper shredder. Though newspaper ink is nontoxic to animals if they ingest it, it can be unsightly if it stains guinea pigs' feet black. At a minimum, the cage bedding should be spot-cleaned daily, and at least once a week all bedding should be changed and the cage wiped out with soap and water.

Guinea Pigs Need Temperature Control

Though guinea pigs can tolerate temperatures down into the high 50s (they are native to the Andes mountains of South America), if they are exposed to these or colder temperatures and their bodies haven't had time to adjust, they can become ill. Conversely, this species cannot sweat, so they shouldn't be exposed to temperatures above 80 degrees. Because of this, as well as the fact that guinea pigs require daily feeding and watering, they should not be left alone at school for the weekend.

3. Finches Are Fun

Teachers often don't consider having birds in the classroom because they can be loud and messy and may bite. Finches, however, make minimal mess and noise and are rarely aggressive. In general, though, finches are to be watched and not handled, although occasionally they can be tamed to sit on a hand. Finches make great classroom pets, and there are many different breeds that come in several colors and feather patterns. For example, zebra finches

have stripes, Gouldian finches have bright, rainbowlike colors, and cute owl finches have stark white faces and black eyes, making them look like little owls. Their colors and rapid movements are arguably as exciting for a kid to watch as any video game might be.

Make Room in the Classroom

Finches are fairly long-lived; on average, they live five to seven years, but some have been reported to live into their teens. Finches are very social, so they are generally housed in pairs. More than a pair of finches may be housed together if the cage is big enough. In general, a pair requires 3 to 4 square feet of cage space. More than one pair of finches in a cage obviously requires more space, and the larger the cage, the better. The bars of the cage must not be spaced wider than 1/2 inch apart or the birds may get their heads caught. The cage floor can be covered in newspaper that should be changed daily — an activity students can take responsibility for.

Kids can also help feed the finches every day. Finches should be fed a pelleted finch diet, fresh water, a small amount of mixed seed, plus a tiny portion of minced vegetables. Ideally, they should have a UV light shining on their cage during the daytime. This helps them make vitamin D in their skin to help them absorb essential nutrients from their food. (Sunshine through a window doesn't accomplish the same thing, as glass filters out the UV rays.)

Love Is the Lesson Plan

Through caring for pets in the classroom, children learn about teamwork, love, and responsibility. Not every type of animal is right for every classroom, but with the help of a veterinarian familiar with exotic pets, teachers can choose the animal that's right for their class and can provide all kids — including those who perhaps cannot have pets at home — with an invaluable experience they will remember for the rest of their lives.