

Does a Guinea Pig Belong in the Classroom?

From *All Creatures Rescue*

<http://allcreaturesrescue.org/site/pet-care/classroom> (no longer online)

Guinea pigs are friendly, interactive animals who make wonderful animal companions. It is therefore not surprising that they are often found in schools as classroom pets. A class pet is can be a wonderful resource - she can provide an excellent opportunity to teach the children about proper animal husbandry and responsible pet ownership. However, is this environment really appropriate for a guinea pig?

Unfortunately, the answer is usually “No.” A teacher must be very involved and dedicated to proper cavy care before the opposite becomes true.

Here are some points to consider:

How will the piggy be involved in the classroom?

She cannot simply be a decoration. A guinea pig needs petting and interaction every single day. She also needs daily “floor time” to run around and explore. This includes weekends, so the piggy would not be able to be left at school on the weekends.

You might also want to consider whether the pig will be safe at school overnight. If your school is prone to break-ins and vandalism, it is probably no more appropriate to leave a pig there overnight than it would be to leave a child there.

- Will you be able to have adult supervised cuddle time every single day?
- Will you be able to give the piggy adult supervised floor time every single day?
- Are you be able to take the piggy home with you on every weekend, break, and holiday, to make sure she gets enough interaction, food, and care?
- Will your pig be safe at the school overnight?

How will the children be allowed to interact with the pig?

Children under ten or so still need constant adult supervision around animals, especially when there is more than one child. A guinea pig can easily become the object of a tug-of-war if no adults are around! Children under age 6 should not be allowed to hold a guinea pig on their own: if the piggy wiggles, or scratches or bites, the child is still young enough to reflexively drop the pig. A fall from a height of even two feet can easily break a leg or cause even worse injuries! Instead, children of this age should be allowed to pet the pig while it is held by an adult, or while it is on the ground (within easy reach of an adult, in case the children get over-zealous).

- Can you provide adult supervision 100% of the time that the pig is in contact with the children?
- Can you limit your children’s interaction with the pig to a level which is appropriate for their age group?
- What will you do with the pig if a child is shown to be allergic?

Who will be responsible for vet care?

Piggies need preventative care check-ups just like a cat or dog. They need to be checked regularly for scurvy (vitamin C deficiency), for overgrown nails and teeth, and general health. Since cavies are considered an

“exotic” pet by most vets, they are often more expensive to treat than cats and dogs. You also need to interview prospective vets and make sure they are experienced with exotics; any vet can treat a piggy for injuries but one without special training might miss important signs of the emergency conditions to which cavies are prone, such as respiratory ailments, bladder sludge and stones, impaction, molar malocclusion, etc.

- Are you prepared to pay several hundred dollars a year for preventative vet care for your class pig?
- Are you able to monitor poop and urine output, breathing, food intake, and skin condition every day for signs of illness?
- Are you able to leave school and run the pig to the vet on short notice, knowing that a few hours could make the difference between life and death?

Who will be responsible for the guinea pig’s daily care?

Piggies require a large cage with a SOLID floor – wire gratings can cause weeping lesions on the feet. The minimum acceptable size cage is about 28" x 42" (7.5 square feet) for a single pig. Although pet stores will tell you that much smaller ones (12"x16") are fine, this is NOT TRUE. The small cages have been shown to be directly responsible for illness such as bumble foot and impaction. You should never buy a pet store cage; instead, build the very largest cage you can using the directions at www.guineapigcages.com. Remember, when she is not out with you, this is the pig’s whole world!

The cage needs to be filled with an inch or two of high-quality aspen shavings (like Aspen Fresh, NOT cedar chips, which are poisonous, or pine, which causes foot lesions) or a manufactured bedding like Yesterday’s News, Carefresh, or EcoStraw. These beddings are not cheap, especially when changed daily (Guinea pigs produce a lot of pellets and urine; they are also somewhat strongly scented and need to be removed from the cage every day). Guinea pigs also tend to “throw” their bedding. Are you prepared to be picking up poops, hay, and shavings off the classroom carpet every day?

Cavies also have special dietary requirements. They cannot make their own vitamin C, so they have to have a supplement (preferably in food form, like a piece of orange) every day. Vitamins in the water are not sufficient and can lead to illness through bacterial contamination. They need limited amounts of timothy-based pellets (NOT alfalfa, which can cause calcium buildup and kidney stones), and they need fresh timothy hay at all times. Hay should be the primary component of the diet. They also need a variety of fruits and veggies every day, as well as clean drinking water. However, some fruits and veggies are NOT good for them, so you will need to do some research to learn which foods are appropriate.

Pigs usually need to be given food and water twice a day – I know mine are shouting for dinner as soon as I walk in the door in the evening! Because of this, guinea pigs cannot be left in the classroom over the weekend – this is the second reason that they need to go home with the primary caretaker every Friday!

Guinea pigs need a variety of toys and to stimulate their minds when they are not interacting with their human friends. Bird toys (the kind made of soft wood, without sharp metal parts) as well as bits of PCV pipe are often good choices. Some piggies like small cat balls with bells in them. With any tube type object – especially cardboard tubes like from toilet paper or wrapping paper rolls – the tube should either be MUCH bigger than your piggy, or should have a slit cut down its entire length, to prevent the piggy from becoming stuck. One of the best toys is a paper lunch bag filled with hay - most piggies will snuggle right in and munch their way out. For all these

reasons and others, we strongly discourage the common policy of sending the piggy home with a different student every weekend.

- How can you be sure that each parent will be willing to transport and assemble the giant cage needed along with all the toys, bowls, hay, pellets, bottles, etc? A smaller cage is NOT okay even if "just for the weekend" - especially when it happens EVERY weekend.
- When the piggy is out of your control, how can you be sure that the appropriate veggies will be fed in the correct amounts, that hay will always be provided, and that the piggy won't get potentially dangerous foods like nuts and seeds?
- Has the parent been instructed on how to control interactions with the excited children so that the piggy is not overhandled or injured?
- Are you sure the parent knows the signs of illness requiring an immediate vet visit and is willing to drop everything to run the pig to the vet?
- Do you have a weekend vet who will allow the treatment on account, or can you give the parents \$200 "just in case"?
- Do you have a fridge to keep fresh fruits and veggies in, or can you bring them from home every morning?
- Are you able to take the piggy home every weekend, break, and holiday to make sure she has proper fresh food every single day?
- Are you prepared to spend about \$150 to set up a good living environment for your pig?
- Are you willing to resist the temptation to send the pig home with someone else who might not be able to provide the proper food, housing, and vet care for her?

Finally, are you prepared to do all of this, every day, for the 5-8 YEARS of a piggy's life??

If you can answer "yes" to all of these questions, your classroom might be acceptable for a piggy.

If you aren't sure you can enthusiastically answer "yes" to every question on this page, you might want to reconsider before deciding to get a classroom pet.

Remember, the way you treat your class piggy will influence the way your students treat their own pets. If you demonstrate that pigs are living, feeling creatures, who need to be respected and cared for, your children will emulate you! However, if you...

- treat your pig like a possession ("it's just a pig, what's the big deal?")
- show that personal convenience is more important than providing proper care, ("a bigger cage would be SUCH a hassle")
- demonstrate that pets can be abandoned or ignored when it is no longer interesting or convenient, ("one of our students is allergic so the pig has to go")

...then your students will learn those lessons, too, and will perpetuate the cycle of neglect that forces rescues like us to exist.