

Pets Make Great Teachers of Compassion

By Sara Schmidt

From *Teaching Tolerance*

<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/pets-make-great-teachers-compassion>

Children can learn a thing or two from pets.

They learn responsibility through feeding and caring for their furry friends. They learn about loss when their pets die and they partake in their first funeral rites.

One of the most powerful lessons that pets can teach us is how to be compassionate to one another despite our differences. Students don't have to have a pet in the home. The classroom pet can help teach many lessons. Children are used to being the smallest beings in the room, but pets are even smaller. So children learn not to play roughly with animals. Learning proper care for animals can help foster kind hearts, but it can also serve as a lesson in not picking on those whom are smaller than we are.

Having an injured class pet can also help illustrate how important it is to respect our classmates with disabilities. An injured dog with staples in his leg can help us teach to be kind while still being mindful of the injury—just as we would not play with a classmate's wheelchair or prosthetic limb while we play with him or her. The dog is still our friend, just as the classmate is, and using the dog to highlight the concept provides a safe zone for students to discuss and ask questions.

Pets can even help reinforce curriculum standards. With older children, have each child write down a few observations and assumptions about the class pet, from her coloration to eating habits, size, and personality. Discuss why they wrote what they did. Were they correct? How were they mistaken?

The same can apply for discussing race. Having three guinea pigs in the classroom that are white, black and brown—or having three different colored cats at home, for homeschoolers—is a great opportunity to discuss how they are the same and how they are different. Do we love any of these animals less or more because of their color? Each animal has his own personality and quirks, yet he is still a guinea pig and our beloved friend. Two brown guinea pigs may not act alike; why would we assume they are all the same just because they share the same color? Using the animals' fur can also help illustrate likeness and differences.

Animals are also wonderful tools to help children talk to one another respectfully. Shy children may feel more comfortable introducing themselves to a class lizard, while more outgoing kids might find themselves lowering their voices to coo quietly at a hamster.

And perhaps the best way to unite the class is to implement the animal into an activity that the children share together—such as monitoring how much the class pet eats or weighs. This would help bring the lesson full circle, connecting the students through their love of the pet.

Sara Schmidt is a writer and editor based in Missouri.