



CRITTERS IN THE CLASSROOM— A DELIGHT OR A DISASTER?



Most educators, especially at the elementary level, are aware that hands-on activities and lesson plans are an exciting and dynamic way to communicate basic concepts to students. We can spend hours dispensing information, explaining charts, maps and graphs, but let a child touch and feel the subject at hand and the learning curve climbs upward. Children naturally learn more by doing than listening.

So, in teaching kindness and respect for animals, a logical tool would be a classroom pet. But therein lies a painful dilemma for humane-minded teachers: Can the benefits gained by a live animal in the classroom outweigh the problems that might arise?

Is the classroom really an appropriate environment for a pet?



It would seem that the answer to both questions would be "yes." Taking care of a classroom pet is a strong activity for empathy building. However, if the needs of the animal are not fulfilled, the classroom pet can inadvertently become a model for neglect or abuse.

When it comes to the classroom pet, teachers become the #1 role model for care and respect of the pet. If they treat the pet with dignity and empathy, guarding its welfare and providing it with a clean, safe environment, the classroom pet can become a symbol of a healthy, wholesome relationship. If the care of the classroom pet is relegated to students with no adult supervision the relationship can become disastrous.



Although the Humane Society of Missouri does not adopt animals for the purpose of becoming classroom pets, we realize that countless classrooms will have a finned, feathered or furry resident this school year.

Before obtaining a classroom pet, we urge teachers to ask the following questions:

What is the purpose for having a classroom pet?

Students learn more from the example you set than from the lessons you teach. How conscientious you are about cleaning the pet's cage, checking the food and water levels, and respecting the animal's right to some quiet time, will all be picked up by the students. Make sure you are willing to set a good example!

Which type of animal would be most appropriate?

What are the physical constraints in your classroom? Is it drafty or excessively sunny? Is the heat turned low on weekends or holidays? What animal do you favor (remember, this is YOUR pet) and are there any allergies or fears on the part of your students? Consider sending a questionnaire to all parents before obtaining an animal.



Consider the total cost.

Depending on the animal you choose, you will need a large cage, water bottle, food dishes, housing, bedding, litter, food, toys and veterinary care—routine and in the event of illness.

Where will the pet go on weekends, holidays and over the summer?

This question should be answered before bringing an animal into the classroom. Most caged animals can be left alone overnight. (Be aware of the temperature changes in your classroom and take precautions.) However, animals should not be left alone for an entire weekend.

Please don't allow the pet to go home with various students each weekend or holiday:

- The changes in environment and excessive handling can cause severe stress for the pet and can be very dangerous.
- Some students are responsible, some are not.
- There may be other pets in the household.
- The parents may have different attitudes toward animals, etc.

The best solution is for the pet to be with the adult and its sole keeper: you.