

Pets and other domestic animals are a valuable part of many family settings and are often an important part of family day care homes. Pets and domestic animals can play a significant role in children's learning and development and can provide children with companionship and entertainment. As with all experiences in family day care, it is the responsibility of schemes to identify and manage any possible safety or health risks to children.

It is essential that all scheme stakeholders - children, families, carers, staff and management - have the opportunity to participate in the development and review of policies and procedures for maintaining children's health and safety around animals and domestic pets. This will help to ensure that policies and procedures reflect the needs and circumstances of the scheme, with a particular focus on carers, families and children.

Why do animals and domestic pets pose potential risks to children?

Many family day carers and staff will argue that a dog or cat is part of the family, and should therefore be part of the family day care home. While pets can give children a great deal of joy, and can help them to learn to be responsible and caring, younger children in particular require close supervision and a very 'controlled' environment when interacting with animals. It is crucial to recognise that the risks that pets may pose to children are increased in a family day care setting by:

- the number of children present in a family day care setting – the more children, the less effective supervision will be
- the varying ages of the children - children under five usually have less ability to regulate their own behaviour or to act reasonably, which can lead to poor judgement around pets and other animals
- children attending family day care who do not have pets or animals at home, and who have no prior knowledge of 'safe behaviour' around pets
- a pet's lack of familiarity with the children
- the 'bustle' of a normal family day care setting which may frighten, upset or overstimulate a pet leading to aggressive behaviour

While the above factors relate to the family day care environment's potential to increase the dangers of pets for children, it is important to note that pets, particularly dogs, can pose major safety risks to young children regardless of the location.

What risks do animals and domestic pets pose for children?

The highest rate of serious injury from a dog bite is in children aged less than five years... Children were most likely to be bitten to the head and face... Dog bites to children relate to the way in which the child interacts with the dog, particularly during play and feeding times. (Ashby, 2001)

Although dogs can pose a significant threat to children's health and safety in the family day care home, other pets and domestic animals have the potential to cause illness or injury to children.



The following are the most common health and safety risks associated with pets or domestic animals:

- children ingesting or touching animal faeces (droppings) or dirt that contains animal faeces or fleas. Cat faeces can be the source of toxoplasmosis, an infection which is of particular risk to pregnant women, though it can also cause mild illness in children
- bites or scratches from cats, birds or small mammals such as rabbits, guinea pigs or ferrets. 'Cat scratch disease' is an infection that can enter the body where a cat scratch breaks the skin's surface. The infection lasts for several weeks and usually causes a lump at the site of the injury as well as gland swelling and soreness. All animal bites and scratches are potentially serious as wounds can become infected, with tetanus bacteria being of particular concern
- cats lying on the face of a sleeping infant, causing suffocation
- catching 'parrot fever' (psittacosis) by breathing dust containing dried bird droppings. 'Parrot fever' causes flu-like symptoms, and can be caught from all parrots, including budgerigars
- animal hair, saliva and skin flakes triggering asthma and allergic reactions
- transfer of ringworm (tinea) and other worms from pets to humans
- animal fleas biting humans

How do young children contribute to the safety risks associated with animals and domestic pets?

It is also important to recognise and understand the role that children themselves can play in increasing the possible dangers associated with pets. Young children often have difficulty understanding that they are hurting or frightening an animal and often do not possess the skills to regulate their own behaviour, particularly when they have had little or no contact with animals. This can result in a normally placid and 'child-friendly' pet reacting aggressively due to fear or pain.

Many of the health and safety risks described above can be managed by ensuring that there are clear policies and procedures available to carers, families and staff. These policies and procedures need to be developed in collaboration with all stakeholders and should be developed to realistically support the co-existence of family pets and children using family day care.

What legal and other requirements do schemes need consider in relation to animals and domestic pets?

It is a Satisfactory requirement of Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) that schemes ensure that:

Every domestic pet and farm animal is in an area separate to and apart from the areas used by children, unless involved in a specific activity that is directly supervised by the carer, staff member or other adult. For example, brushing or bathing the dog, bottle feeding a lamb, providing food or water for birds or chickens. [Principle 4.1 FDCQA Quality Practices Guide (2nd edition, 2004)]

The *National Standards for Family Day Care* includes standards relating to domestic animals and, where they apply, licensing regulations also contain requirements regarding domestic animals.

How can schemes develop policies to support children's health and safety with animals and domestic pets?

The main challenge that schemes can face when developing policies and procedures regarding animals in family day care results from a carer's viewpoint that a pet is a valid family member. Suggesting that a family pet may be potentially dangerous or unhygienic can cause resentment and offence. It is therefore essential that issues regarding child safety and animals be approached with sensitivity, empathy and a focus upon best outcomes for children.



When developing policies for managing pets and animals in the family day care home, it may be useful to begin by identifying a rationale or reason for having such a policy. While a rationale may certainly include reference to Quality Assurance and any relevant regulatory requirements, it is useful to also include other researched information which outlines why it is important to recognise and manage the potential risks associated with young children and domestic animals. This may assist both current and future scheme stakeholders to understand the value of having and implementing consistent procedures which focus first and foremost upon the wellbeing of children.

How can schemes support and monitor carer's compliance with policies about animals and domestic pets?

It may be necessary to work with and support individual carers to ensure that policy guidelines are implemented in ways that will suit specific family day care homes, children, families and carers. Some appropriate activities that children may be involved in with carer or staff supervision could include:

- washing or brushing the dog
- brushing the cat
- changing the food and water for a pet, for example a bird, rabbit or guinea pig
- feeding fish
- collecting chicken eggs
- bottle feeding lambs
- patting or observing a pet or domestic animal

In the interests of hygiene and infection control, handwashing and awareness of other cleanliness issues should be fundamental to any written procedures regarding to children's contact with animals.

It may also be beneficial for policies relating to animals and domestic pets in family day care to acknowledge the value of children learning to care for animals safely and humanely. To achieve this, policies may include guidance for carers to support children to learn about safe behaviours and humane care for animals and domestic pets.

Once the scheme has developed policies and procedures for pets and domestic animals in family day care homes, these need to be regularly monitored, discussed, and periodically reviewed with input invited from all stakeholders.

Issues to consider when developing policies about animals and domestic pets

To determine policy guidelines which best promote children's health and safety in family day care homes where there are domestic animals, the scheme may consider issues such as:

- the types of domestic animals or pets in the scheme. For example, a rural scheme may have many family day carers who keep livestock such as chickens, cows, sheep or horses; an inner city scheme may have more small indoor domestic pets such as small dogs, cats, birds or fish
- the ages of children and their level of skills and abilities
- the practicalities of carers managing spaces that are shared by children and animals. For example, where children and animals use the yard at alternate times, how will the carer manage moving the animal elsewhere while still maintaining adequate supervision of children
- maintaining hygiene where children and animals share the same space at alternate times, for example, removing animals' bedding and/or food and water containers, and removing any soiled items effectively from the area prior to children using it
- the familiarity and comfort levels of individual children and families with domestic pets and other animals
- any known or potential allergies or illnesses that children may suffer from as a result of coming into contact with domestic animals or the by-products of domestic animals
- the welfare of domestic animals and pets in family day care homes
- any Federal, state or territory legislative requirements, including child care licensing, public health, animal welfare and occupational health and safety

When developing or researching information and strategies for these policies and procedures, it is recommended that schemes seek current information and advice from relevant health and safety authorities. Children's hospitals and publicly funded child safety programs often have information and practical suggestions about children and animal safety.

It is particularly advantageous to ensure that new carers understand and work within the scheme's guidelines for animals and children. It is equally important to provide new families with opportunities to provide any information or preferences they have regarding their child's association with animals.

Developing policies and procedures to support safe practices for pets and domestic animals in family day care is not about 'banning' animals, or even about 'hiding them away' from children and families.

The value of pets to children's learning and enjoyment should not be underestimated. However, it is the primary responsibility of scheme management, staff and carers to consider children's health, safety and wellbeing as a priority, and to develop policies and procedures regarding domestic animals which balance with this priority.



References and Further Information

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- Stonehouse, A. (2001). *The cornerstone of quality in family day care and child care centres – parent-professional partnerships*. Melbourne: Centre for Community Child Health

Useful Websites

Better Health Channel - www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Centre for Community Child Health - www.rch.org.au/ccch

Responsible Pet Ownership Program - www.pets.info.vic.gov.au

Child and Youth Health - www.cyh.com



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