

# Keeping pets in child care

by Julie Peters

Having a pet at your child care service gives children the opportunity to interact with animals and learn valuable life skills that they can use throughout their future lives.

While there are many benefits to keeping pets in child care, there are also a range of issues that educators need to consider for the safety and wellbeing of both the children and the animals concerned. This article will discuss the benefits of teaching children to care for a pet and outline the practical implications that educators will need to consider.

## The benefits of pets in child care

Having a relationship with a pet can help children develop a caring attitude and skills such as nurturing, responsibility, empathy and improved communication. Having a pet in a child care environment enables children who are not otherwise exposed to animals to learn these skills in child care. The pet can become part of your daily educational program and can lead to activities and learning about other animals.

## Choosing the right pet

If your service has never had a pet before, it is important that you discuss the possibility of keeping a pet with all families at your service. This ensures parents are able to give feedback about the decision as well as provide you with information about any allergies, fears or phobias their child may have. All of this information must be taken into consideration before you decide on the right animal for your service.



### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 3.1, 4.1 and 4.3

**OSHCQA Principles:** 3.1 and 6.2 - 6.4

**QIAS Principles:** 2.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.3

Unless there is an educator at the service willing to take the pet home at night, it may be better to choose a pet that is low maintenance such as goldfish or mice. It is also important for the educators at your service to discuss the ramifications of bringing a pet into the service. Questions to consider include:

- Who will pay for the care and upkeep of the animal, including feeding, health care and cleaning?
- How will the pet be cared for on weekends and during service closure periods?
- What physical space is available in the service? Is it adequate for the pet you are thinking of?
- Are all educators and families happy with the decision to get a pet?
- What time will be available throughout the day to care for the pet or will educators be asked to give up some personal time for this?
- Are there any children or educators at your service who are allergic to, or have phobias of, animals?
- What changes to your service's policies and procedures need to be considered? For example, your hand washing policy will need to be updated to include washing hands after having contact with the pet.

Some animals, such as lizards, turtles, snakes, spiders and tropical fish may not be appropriate for the child care setting. Check with a veterinarian if you are unsure whether a particular pet is suitable for children, and check with the local health department for regulations and advice regarding pets in child care. Some states and territories require a license for keeping certain animals.

Animals that may be more likely to be suitable for child care may include goldfish, hermit crabs, stick insects, mice or rats. All of these animals are relatively low maintenance and can be left safely over a weekend if they are provided with sufficient food and water.

## What are the health and safety risks?

There are a number of issues you need to consider, including:

- Preventing children ingesting or touching faeces (droppings) or dirt that contains animal faeces or fleas
- Potential allergies. Many children are allergic to animals and may have symptoms when they are around them. Care also needs to be taken with children who have food allergies as some pet foods contain common allergens such as nuts and seafood
- Dog and cat bites are the most reported types of injuries caused by pets. The tearing and puncture wounds they produce can cause serious infections
- Parasites that may be transferred by pets, such as ringworm (which is a fungus), worms, fleas and ticks.

It is essential at all times to be conscious of the wellbeing and safety of both children and the animal/s in the service. Young children often don't understand that they are hurting or frightening an animal, which can result in a normally placid pet reacting aggressively in fear or pain.

Having a pet is not appropriate for every child care service. If your service does not want to get a pet, then there are other interesting ways to introduce animals to children. For example, have an outing to a wildlife park in your town or city or regularly explore the outdoor area of your service or local park to see what creatures can be found, including birds, snails and butterflies. You can also have visitors and programs in your service such as mobile farms, reptile keepers and egg hatching programs.

## Conclusion

Interacting with and learning to care for a pet can be a valuable part of a child's learning. Although there are a number of issues that need to be considered before bringing a pet into your service, the benefits if this is possible are numerous

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

## Pet safety in family day care

Pets are often regarded as a valuable part of the family, and as such they are often seen by carers as being an important part of the family day care home.

However, it must be recognised that even the most good natured pet can pose potential health and safety risks, particularly to younger children. For this reason, Family Day Care Quality Assurance requires that 'every domestic pet and farm animal is kept separate to and apart from the area used by children, unless involved in a specific activity that is directly supervised by the carer, staff member or other adult' (NCAC, 2004, p.47).

It is important that each carer adopts a risk management approach to having pets. This means that carers need to consider their specific environment, including the type of pet they have, the physical environment and the ages and temperaments of the children for whom they care. Carers should work with coordination unit staff to ensure that control measures are used to minimise any potential risks to children's wellbeing.

Schemes also need to develop policies and procedures regarding pets and other domestic animals in family day care homes to guide carers' everyday practices. These policies and procedures need to be regularly monitored, discussed and periodically reviewed with input invited from all stakeholders.

## References and further reading

- NCAC. (2004). *Family Day Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Surry Hills, NSW: Author.
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