Choosing, Introducing and Caring for Pets

Having a pet to talk to and touch can be a great benefit to children in child care, especially shy youngsters. Children can learn responsibility by caring for a pet and may enjoy watching animals play and eat. Having a pet in your child care program takes thought and planning. Before you go out and buy a gerbil or a rabbit, be ready to ensure children are safe and healthy around the pet, and that the pet is treated gently and appropriately. Here are some ways to make having a pet in child care a positive experience for the children, the pet, and yourself:

- **Consider how children will react to pets.** Some children may be eager to interact with a pet, but others may be reluctant. Some children are scared of certain types of animals, such as dogs. If the children in your care are old enough, it might be helpful to let them participate in the process of selecting a new pet.

- **Take into account the temperament of the individual animal.** Some animals are gentle and patient around children, while others are frightened by noise or do not like to be touched. It is important to get to know the individual animal, to find the best possible fit for the children in your care.

- **Consider having a reliable pet visit before you decide.** Prepare the children for the visit and see how they react to the pet. This may help you decide whether a full-time class pet is a good idea. Remember, though, that children will need to be taught how to appropriately interact with any animal in the classroom, and that bringing in a pet for a day constitutes a disruption in routine which may affect children’s behavior with the pet.

- **Remember that having a pet is a long-term commitment.** This commitment does not end when the school year is over. If you are thinking of buying a pet for your child care program, think about who will take care of the pet on weekends, holidays, and summer or winter vacations.

- **Keep in mind that pets can be expensive.** Determine in advance whether the child care program will pay for pet supplies and veterinary bills, or if you will have to assume those responsibilities. All pets present in child care programs in the state of Texas are required to have an up-to-date statement of health from a local veterinarian on file, as well as records of all required vaccinations.

- **Be aware of the risks of having a pet in a child care setting.** Although having pets in child care offers many benefits for children, there can also be risks. Here are some of the most common risks to weigh before accepting pets into your child care program:
  
  ◦ **Allergies.** Some children may be allergic to pet dander. Remember to check with parents to identify any pet allergies before inviting animals into your child care setting.
  
  ◦ **Germs.** Furry animals, especially cats, may pick up and transport fungus spores in their coats. Children petting the cat may transfer these spores to themselves and others.
  
  ◦ **Biting.** Animals are living creatures, and their behavior can be unpredictable. Children may get bitten if a pet is mishandled. It may be a good idea to invite a local veterinarian to help teach the children how to care for pets before introducing a new pet into the child care setting.
• Avoid pets which are known to pose health or safety hazards to children. Some examples include:

  ◦ **Reptiles and amphibians.** Reptiles and amphibians can pass on salmonella, an intestinal infection, when handled.
  ◦ **Chickens and ducks.** Chickens and ducks can also carry salmonella, which can be spread by direct or indirect contact.
  ◦ **Birds of the parrot family.** These include parrots, budgies, parakeets, and love-birds. These birds can transmit an airborne respiratory illness to humans. Keep them away from rooms where children will play or sleep.
  ◦ **Cats.** Beyond the risk posed by fungal spores which can be transported in cats’ coats, cats also typically require litter boxes. Cat feces may contain parasites that can be transmitted to humans. If children touch anything that has come into contact with cat feces, they may become infected. This is especially problematic in infant and toddler classrooms, where children are likely to try putting things in their mouths. While most infections transmitted through cat feces are mild, contact with cat feces by pregnant women can cause birth defects through toxoplasmosis.

• **Prepare children before introducing a pet to your child care program.** This is true whether the pet is a visitor or a regular part of the classroom. Talk with them about the animal and explain what it is and what it does. Show children how the animal likes to be held and touched. Let each child who is interested have a turn holding or petting it. Use positive guidance, such as “Be gentle with the rabbit. The rabbit likes to be held like this. Squeezing hurts the rabbit.” Talk about how the animal might feel, even though younger children might not always understand how an animal or another person might feel.

• **Supervise children carefully around pets.** Young children may enjoy the responsibility of helping care for pets, but still need careful supervision to handle the pet appropriately and avoid spreading germs. Be sure an adult is near children whenever they are handling or caring for pets. Set rules about when pets can be touched, and enforce those rules carefully.

• **Keep parents informed about when the pet is or will be in the facility.** Parents should be notified in writing. For parents of children already in care, this allows them to decide whether to prohibit or restrict their child’s contact with the animal. For parents considering enrolling their child in your program, this may help them decide whether or not to enroll. Parents will know whether their children are allergic to or afraid of certain types of animals. They can also help with strategies to introduce reluctant children to pets.

• **Wash hands after touching, feeding, or caring for animals.** Teach children to wash their hands after any contact with animals or animal supplies as well. This is especially important before eating.

• **Keep your pet clean.** Pets should be bathed regularly according to veterinary instructions. Some animals, such as dogs, use their tongues to clean themselves. As a result, you should try to discourage pets from licking children.

• **Keep your pet healthy.** Take pets to the veterinarian regularly for checkups. Keep animals free of internal and external parasites. Make sure pets receive all their shots, including distemper and rabies shots if applicable.

• **Clean up after pets.** Keep the environment free of animal feces. Some animals can carry parasites called roundworms, which children can contract if they come in contact with the feces of an infected animal.

Adapted from “Choosing, Introducing, and Caring for Pets in Child Care.” eXtension, 2010.