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Animals in the Classroom

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide information that will promote health and safety for staff and students when animals are brought into the classroom. Many times inadequate understanding of animal disease and behavior can lead to unnecessary risks for students, teachers, staff, and animals. These guidelines are designed to promote a better understanding of:

1. Animals that are not safe to bring into classroom situations.
2. Safety precautions for animals that have the potential to transmit disease to children.
3. Safety precautions for introducing animals into classroom situations.
4. How to properly handle animal wastes to limit the spread of disease from animals to children.

Animals That Are UNACCEPTABLE for Schools

- **Wild Animals.** Wild animals pose a risk for transmitting rabies as well as other zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be transferred from animals to man) and, therefore, should not be brought to schools or handled by children. The behavior of wild animals also tends to be unpredictable.

Exceptions to this recommendation include those instances when wild animals are presented at schools by professionals who have experience handling wildlife, or the animals are displayed in enclosed cages that prevent contact between the animal and the children. Because of the high incidence of rabies in bats, raccoons, skunks, and wild carnivores, these animals should not be permitted on school grounds under any circumstances (including recently killed animals).

- **Poisonous Animals.** Spiders, venomous insects, poisonous snakes, reptiles, and lizards should be prohibited from being brought onto school grounds.

Exceptions to this recommendation include those instances when such animals are presented at schools by professionals who have experience handling such animals, or the animals are displayed in cases that provide a physical barrier between the animal and the children (e.g., animal is enclosed behind sturdy glass or plastic).

- **Wolf-Hybrids.** These animals are crosses between a wolf and a dog and have shown a propensity for aggression, especially toward young children. Therefore, they should not be allowed on school grounds.
- **Stray Animals.** Stray animals should never be brought onto school campuses because the health and vaccination status of these animals is seldom known.

- **Baby Chicks and Ducks.** Baby chicks and ducks are inappropriate in schools due to the high risk of salmonellosis and campylobacteriosis.
- **Aggressive Animals.** Animals that are bred or trained to demonstrate aggression toward humans and/or animals or animals that have demonstrated similar aggression in the past should not be permitted on school grounds. Aggressive, unprovoked, or threatening behavior mandates an animal's immediate removal.

Exceptions may be sentry or canine corps dogs for demonstration that are under the control of trained military or law enforcement officials.

General Guidelines for Animals in Schools

Whenever animals are being brought into a school, or when students are being brought to a place where animals are present, a person designated by the school (e.g., the principal, nurse, risk manager, etc.) shall be notified so that planning and preparation can take place prior to student-animal interaction.

It is important that animals that are brought onto school campuses be clean and healthy so that the risk of their transmitting diseases to students is minimal. Children tend to be more susceptible to zoonotic diseases and parasites than adults due to a lack of hand washing and the tendency of young children to put their hands in their mouths. Therefore, animals that are handled should be well groomed and free of internal parasites, disease, etc. to decrease the likelihood of the animal transmitting these vectors to the students. Visiting animals should be restricted to an area designated by the principal or administrator. Kittens and puppies may only be appropriate for short classroom visits.

- **Verified Rabies Vaccination.** Evidence of current rabies vaccination is required for all dogs, cats, and ferrets that are brought onto school property for instructional purposes. Dogs and cats under three months of age and not vaccinated against rabies should be not handled by children.
- **Health Certificates for Dogs.** A health certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian is required, showing proof of current vaccination against canine distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parainfluenza, parvovirus, bordetella, and rabies. Animals must have had a negative fecal exam for internal parasites within the past six months. The animal should be free of external parasites such as fleas, ticks, and mites. Dogs over four months of age should be housebroken. Younger animals should be approved by the principal or administrator before visiting.
- **Health Certificates for Cats.** A health certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian is required, showing proof of current vaccination against feline panleukopenia, rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, feline leukemia, and rabies. Cats should be free of external parasites such as fleas, ticks, and mites.

Proper Restraint of Animals

Because animals may react strangely to classroom situations, it is important to have an effective way to control them. Fear may cause an animal to attempt to escape or even act aggressively in situations that are unusual to them. Appropriate restraint devices will allow the holder to react quickly and prevent harm to the students or escape of the animal.

- **Collars and Leashes.** Dogs, cats, and ferrets should have a proper collar, harness, and/or leash as appropriate when on school grounds or in the classroom so that they can be easily controlled. Household rope or string is not considered an appropriate restraint. The owner or person responsible for the animal should stay with the animal during its visit to the school. No animal should be allowed to roam unrestrained on the school campus or in the classroom.
- **Pet Birds.** Pet birds should never be allowed to fly free in a classroom.
- **Designated Areas.** All animals should be restricted to the area designated by the principal or administrator. Animals may be allowed in school cafeterias at times other than during meals when:
 - Effective partitioning or self-closing doors separate the area from food storage or food preparation areas.
 - Condiments, equipment, and utensils are stored in enclosed cabinets or removed from the area when animals are present.
 - Dining areas, including tables, countertops, and similar surfaces, are effectively cleaned before the next meal service.
- **Estrus.** Dogs and cats should be determined not to be in estrus ("heat") at the time of the visit.

Special Conditions for Specific Animals

Specific recommendations should be observed for the following animals because of zoonotic diseases that they can carry or because of certain tendencies:

- **Parrots, Parakeets, Budgies, and Cockatiels.** Because these birds can carry zoonotic diseases such as psittacosis, they should not be handled by children. Birds showing any signs of illness should not be brought to the school. Birds may be brought to school as long as their cages are clean and their wastes can be contained, such as within a cage. Birds permanently housed on school property in cages should be treated prophylactically for psittacosis 45 days prior to entering the premises.
- **Ferrets.** Ferrets can be allowed to visit school classrooms, but they must be handled by the person responsible for them. Children should not be allowed to hold ferrets due to the animal's propensity to bite when startled.
- **Reptiles and Amphibians.** Because all reptiles and amphibians can carry salmonellosis, even when reared as pets or for display, special precautions should be instituted when school children handle them. School children under 12 years of age should be prohibited from handling reptiles and amphibians. No turtles with a carapace length less than four inches are allowed in schools. Any child handling a reptile or amphibian should be instructed to wash his/her hands thoroughly afterwards.

- **Fish.** Disposable gloves should be worn when cleaning aquariums. Used tank water should be disposed of in sinks that are not used for food preparation or for obtaining water for human consumption.
- **Guide, Hearing, and other Service Dogs and Law Enforcement Animals.** These animals should not be prohibited from being on school grounds or in classroom situations.

Student Contact With Animals

Even very tame animals may react aggressively in strange situations; therefore, student contact with animals should always be supervised and regulated by a few basic rules.

- Because increased activity and sudden movements can make animals feel threatened, all student contact with animals should be highly organized and supervised. Animal bites can usually be avoided if students are kept in small groups, and rough play or teasing of animals should not be allowed.
- It is recommended that children not be allowed to feed pets directly from their hands.
- Small animals such as rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, and mice should be handled with leather gloves whenever possible. Rabbits do not like to be held and will struggle to free themselves.
- Children should be discouraged from "kissing" animals or having them in close contact with their faces. This statement is especially true for reptiles and amphibians.
- Education with animals should be used to reemphasize proper hygiene and hand washing recommendations. All children who handle animals should wash their hands immediately after handling them.
- Animals should not be allowed in the vicinity of sinks where children wash their hands; in any area where food is prepared, stored, or served; or in areas used for the cleaning or storage of food utensils or dishes. Animals should also be restricted from nursing stations or sterile and clean supply rooms. Do not allow cats or dogs in sand boxes where children play.
- Immunocompromised students may be especially susceptible to zoonotic diseases; therefore, special precautions may be needed to minimize the risk of disease transmission to these students. Consultation with the child's parents about precautionary measures is strongly advised. Recommendations for specific precautionary measures may also be solicited from the Washington State Department of Health Zoonotic Disease Program.

Handling and Disposal of Animal Wastes While on School Campuses

- **Clean Up of Animal Wastes.** Children should not be allowed to handle or clean up any form of animal waste (feces, urine, blood, etc.). Animal wastes should be disposed of where children cannot come in contact with them such as in a plastic bag or container with a lid or via the sewage system for feces. Food handlers should not be involved in the cleanup of animal waste.
- **Prohibited Areas.** Animal wastes should not be disposed of, and visiting animals should not be allowed to defecate in or near areas where children routinely play or congregate (i.e., sandboxes, school playgrounds, etc.).
- **Litter Boxes.** Litter boxes for visiting animals should not be allowed in classrooms.

Sources: *Alabama State Department of Public Health*
 Washington State Department of Public Health
 Washington State Department of Agriculture