



SISC Safety and Loss Risk Management Bulletin

Advisory Regarding Animals in Schools

September 2003

According to the National Science Teachers Association, “Observation and experimentation with living organisms give students unique perspectives of life processes that are not provided by other modes of instruction. Studying animals in the classroom enables students to develop skills of observation and comparison, a sense of stewardship, and an appreciation for the unity, interrelationships, and complexity of life.” Beyond that – kids just like animals.

The following information is meant to provide guidance to district administrators as they consider incorporating the use of animals (both alive and dead) into school programs.

Live Animals Brought Onto Campus

Districts should discourage the practice of students or teachers bringing household pets onto campus. Such “pets” pose an unknown risk of disease, scratching, and/or biting injury. There have been several reports of injury to individuals in SISC member districts from incidents involving an instructor’s pet that was brought to the school site. Instructors should also be aware that they might be held personally liable in the event their pet injures someone or damages property. Although an instructor may feel that his or her pet is safe, or a student may want to bring a pet for class viewing, the risks outweigh the benefit in most cases.

Schools often have outside vendors or animal handlers bring animals for viewing and/or demonstration. Such practice is acceptable if the following conditions are met. Only “professional” animal handlers should be allowed to bring animals onto campus for viewing/demonstration. Prior to administrative approval, all animal handlers should be able to produce the following:

- A certificate of insurance that covers the handler and names the district as an additional insured.
- A list/description of all prior incidents/injuries involving animal viewing and demonstration or certification that no such incidents/injuries have occurred.
- A list of precautions to follow to prevent injury to students, including a description of appropriate student behavior and appropriate participant age.

The following section outlines the animals that are inappropriate to house in schools and may also be used as guidance for evaluating animal viewings/demonstrations brought onto campus.

Live Animals Housed on Campus

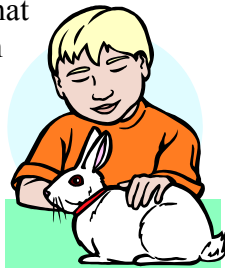
Although housing animals in classrooms is popular, care should be taken in the selection of such animals as well as the ongoing maintenance and handling.

Some animals are not appropriate choices to house on campus because of the potential risk of injury and/or disease transmission. Several sources have listed the following animals as unacceptable for the classroom.

- Poisonous animals (spiders, snakes, venomous insects)
- Wild (non-domestic) animals (especially those at high risk for rabies; armadillos have been implicated in Hansen disease; Salmonella in hedgehogs; tuberculosis in brushy-tailed opossums; Hantavirus and leptospirosis in wild rodents.)
- Wolf-hybrids (crosses between wolf and dog)
- Stray animals (dogs and cats—particularly those less than one year of age)
- Baby ducks and chicks (high risk of Salmonellosis and campylobacteriosis)
- Aggressive animals (an animal displaying unprovoked threatening behavior should be removed from the classroom.)
- Other animals that should not be brought onto campus include: wild birds, snapping turtles, bats, or skunks.

Reptiles are notorious for carrying salmonella, especially turtles. For this reason, many schools have opted not to have reptiles in the classroom.

The “safest” animals are those that are handled and exhibited in an appropriate manner. Clearly, the small mammals pose the least threat to children with regard to disease transmission. These include mice, hamsters, gerbils, rats, and rabbits. Hamsters and gerbils are known to be biters so the other species are preferable. None of these species are known to transmit rabies to humans.



Partnering with a local veterinarian can help ensure proper animal selection as well as ensure the health of the animal.

Whenever feasible, animals that are brought into the classroom should be cleared by a veterinarian before entering the class. In addition, strong consideration should be given to allowing only animals bred in captivity to be housed on campus due to the wide variety of diseases carried by “wild” animals. Animals must have current vaccinations appropriate to the species. If possible, a certificate of health should be obtained by the supplier or a veterinarian before introducing the animal to the class.

An effort should be made to minimize student handling of animals, especially in elementary classes, in order to reduce the risk of transmission of disease, bacteria, and ringworm. Limited student handling also reduces the risk of bites and/or allergic reactions/aggravations. Students should not be charged with cleaning pens and/or cages unless they are closely supervised, gloves are worn, and strict procedures are followed. This activity significantly increases the risk of disease transmission and allergic reactions if not controlled properly.

Although it is common for students to take class animals home during weekends or over school breaks, such practices should be carefully planned and controlled. Written permission and acknowledgement from the student’s parent or guardian should be obtained in advance to sending the animal home with the student.

Also, explicit written procedures outlining how to properly care for the animal should accompany the animal to the student’s home. If there is any question regarding the animal’s health or safety, the instructor should not send the animal to the student’s home.

Good housekeeping and safety practices are essential in providing a safe environment for both students and animals. Pens and cages should be cleaned regularly and the classroom should be free from animal debris and droppings. Classroom animals are a common cause of indoor air quality problems. Diligence in maintaining good housekeeping practices will help prevent such problems.

Human food should not be allowed in areas where animals are kept or where animal food is stored. Frequent hand washing should be promoted, especially after handling an animal and prior to eating. Students should never be allowed to “kiss” animals. Gloves should be considered when handling some animals.

Pens and cages should be located so as not to cause a hazard from electrical extension cords and overloaded circuits. A fire loss occurred in a SISC member district due to an animal escaping its cage and chewing the electrical wiring, thereby starting a fire.

Parents should be notified if any live animal is to be kept in their child’s classroom. Children who have allergies, asthma, or other breathing difficulty may react unfavorably to the confined exposure of being in a classroom with animals.

Another problem that requires strong administrative intervention is the practice of staff feeding wild cats that live on or near the school site. Such practice encourages the cats to make the school site their home, thereby, posing a host of potential problems with safety, facilities, and grounds. There are also several diseases associated with cats and kittens where the risk increases in non-domestic cats. Encouraging a wild cat to take up residence at a school site is a practice that should not be allowed.

Dead Animals Used in Classrooms

All animal specimens should be acquired from a reliable scientific company or from a veterinarian who can certify the specimen is free from disease, bacteria, or parasites. Dead animals found by the side of the road or from a non-certifying source should never be brought into the classroom.

Pursuant to Education Code Section 32255 et seq., students in Kindergarten through grade twelve have the right to refrain from participating in activities that they feel would constitute “harmful and destructive use of animals.” When courses require the use of live or dead animals, or parts of animals, students must be notified of their rights. The student’s objections must then be substantiated by a note from the parent or guardian.

Definitions

Campylobacteriosis – An acute disease caused by the campylobacter bacteria characterized by diarrhea, abdominal pain, malaise, fever, nausea, and vomiting.

Hansen disease – Leprosy, caused by the leprae bacterium.

Hantavirus – A virus that causes hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS). Symptoms begin with flu-like signs and progress rapidly to acute respiratory distress. It is often fatal.

Leptospirosis – (Weil’s disease) A condition resulting from leptospira spirochetes that causes infectious, hemorrhagic, jaundice; muscular pains; fever; and enlargement of the liver and spleen.

Rabies – A virus that affects the central nervous system and can result in paralysis and death.

Ringworm – A common fungal zoonosis affecting the skin. About 25% of human ringworm is attributed to animals.

Salmonella – A group of bacterium, some of which can produce a mild gastroenteritis, and others that produce a severe and often fatal food poisoning.

Tuberculosis – an infectious disease caused by the tubercle bacillus and is characterized by inflammatory infiltrations, abscesses, fibrosis, and calcification. It mostly affects the respiratory system.

Summary

According to the National Science Teachers Association, the instructional reasons for animals in the classrooms are:

- To stimulate interest in the study of animal behavior.
- To develop skills of observation and comparison.
- To develop an appreciation for the unity, interrelationship, and complexity of life.
- To give students a unique perspective of the life processes through experimentation.
- To develop a sense of stewardship and responsibility.

Clearly, there are educational benefits of animals in schools. However, the benefits should not come at the cost of sick or injured students, damaged property, or impaired air quality. Prudent consideration given to the selection of animals, handling procedures, classroom operations, and administrative policies will go a long way in controlling the risk, thereby, making the addition of animals a positive experience for everyone.

Additional information

- Animals in Schools: A zoonosis threat? An interview with Lucille H. Nix, DVM
- California Education Code Section 32255 et seq.
- National Science Teachers Association www.nsta.org
- School Health Alert-Animals in Schools: A Zoonosis Threat? (January 1998) P.O. Box 150127, Nashville, TN 37215
- Science Safety Handbook for California Public Schools, Science and Environmental Education Unit, California Department of Education.

For additional information or assistance contact your SISC Safety and Loss Control representative.

