ANIMALS IN THE CLASSROOM: SHOULD YOU OR SHOULDN’T YOU?

A CLASSROOM PET can be a great asset when teaching life sciences, building empathy and respect for living things, and fostering responsibility. But the learning environment can turn sour when, at the end of the school year, the classroom mascot becomes the classroom problem and must be turned over to the local animal shelter because there is no one to care for him or her.

Thinking Ahead

Before bringing a live animal into your classroom, ask yourself these questions:

- Are live animals necessary to achieve the learning objectives I set for my students? Consider field trips to parks, zoos and wildlife habitats, guest speakers with “ambassador” animals and the creation of a nature habitat in or around your school.
- Can I ensure consistent, conscientious and compassionate care?
- Will the animal be activity integrated into a variety of lessons?
- Do any of my students have asthma or allergies that would preclude keeping certain animals?
- How will I ensure the health and care of the animal during holidays, breaks, weekends and at year’s end? Every summer, shelters across the country are inundated with hamsters, mice, rabbits, gerbils, fish, guinea pigs and reptiles whose tenure as classroom animals ended unceremoniously. The best time to determine summer and spring, fall and holiday break care for your classroom animal is before you make the decision to place one in your classroom. It is also a good idea to have a relationship with a local group dedicated to the type of animal you are considering. They may be a good resource for a rescued animal rather than purchasing one from a pet store. Additionally, they can provide you behavioral and other tips throughout the year and perhaps even visit your classroom!
- What procedure will I utilize for my classroom animal during fire drills or classroom evacuations? Your students will quickly assess that how you treat the classroom pet directly defines how you value the life of that animal. Make certain that all classroom pets are included in fire and evacuation drills so that students can see your respect for all life.
- What animal is best for my classroom? Learn as much as you can about a prospective animal. For example, is the animal active during the day or at night? If you wake a nocturnal animal such as a hamster, she may bite. How long does he live? Does she like to live singly or in pairs? Can the animal be handled safely?
- Am I prepared to fully animal-proof my classroom? This means that all wires and cables are secured and hidden, if your classroom animal will be free-roaming and that anything that might be attractive to them is up and off the ground? Additionally, all potential escape routes and inaccessible hiding places must be blocked.
- How many is too many? Don’t increase the population of unwanted pets. Keep social animals in same sex pairs or have them spayed or neutered.

Basic Guidelines

If you determine that a classroom pet would best meet your goals, be prepared to observe some basic guidelines:

- Discuss the idea with your principal and clearly define all aspects of housing a classroom animal, including any liabilities.
- The ultimate responsibility for the animal is yours and includes the cost of care.
- Educate your students about the animal’s needs, habits and behaviors.
- Integrate the animal across the spectrum of your curriculum.
- Ensure that a proper habitat for the animal is constructed and maintained. Set it up in a place free of drafts, harsh sunlight and high traffic.

AHS: Animals in the Classroom: Should You or Shouldn’t You?
Rev. October 2, 2007
• Keep the habitat contained and clean. Discuss the animal’s presence with the custodial staff and decide your respective roles and responsibilities. Check on the use of insecticides or other pest control chemicals and cleaning products that may be harmful to the animal.
• Determine who is responsible for the animal on weekends, breaks, holidays and summer vacations ahead of time. Be aware that many public buildings reduce heat and air conditioning after hours and on weekends.
• Make provisions for evacuating the animal in case of fire or other disaster.
• Be prepared to deal with the issue of death and your students’ grief should the animal die.
• Finally, if you decide to bring an animal into your classroom, please adopt one from a local shelter or rescue group rather than buying one at a pet store.

For more information, please visit
www.azhumane.org

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado
©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.

AHS: Animals in the Classroom: Should You or Shouldn’t You?
Rev. October 2, 2007