

# PETS IN CHILDCARE SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS

The benefits of pet ownership outweigh the risks, but precautions are encouraged. If you choose to have an animal in the childcare or school setting, follow the listed guidelines to decrease the risk of spreading disease. Check with your local health department or childcare licensing agency before bringing any pets to your childcare setting or school because there may be state and/or local regulations that must be followed.

## General considerations

- Inform parents/guardians of the benefits and potential risks associated with animals in the classroom.
- Consult with parents/guardians to determine special considerations needed for children with weakened immune systems and who have allergies or asthma.
- Notify parents/guardians of any child whose skin is broken by an animal bite or scratch.
- Supervise children when handling animals.

## Types of pets allowed in childcare and school settings include:

- guinea pigs
- gerbils
- domestic-bred rats
- rabbits
- dogs
- birds (must be free of *Chlamydophila psittaci*)
- fish
- domestic-bred mice
- hamsters
- cats

## Animals not recommended in school settings and not allowed for childcare settings (MN Rule 9502.0435 Subpt 12) include:

- ferrets
- reptiles (e.g. lizards, turtles, snakes, iguanas)
- poultry (especially baby chicks and ducklings)
- inherently dangerous animals (e.g., lions, tigers, cougars, and bears)
- nonhuman primates (e.g., monkeys and apes)
- mammals at higher risk of transmitting rabies (e.g., bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes)
- aggressive or unpredictable animals, wild or domestic
- stray animals with unknown health and vaccination history
- venomous or toxin-producing spiders, insects, reptiles, and amphibians

These animals are not allowed or recommended because:

- Reptiles and poultry can carry *Salmonella* bacteria and can be a source of infection to infants, children, and staff.
- Wild animals can be a source of infectious bacteria, parasites, viruses, and fungi. Biting incidents from animals are a concern especially from wild animals.
- In some municipalities, ordinances restrict wild/exotic animals and/or farm animals.

## Where to keep pets

- Keep pets in designated areas only. They should be separated from food preparation, food storage, or eating areas.
- Keep pets in clean living quarters. Cages should be covered, sturdy, and easy to clean, and they should sit on surfaces that are solid and easy to clean.

### Care and maintenance

- Develop and follow written procedures concerning the care and maintenance of pets with the advice of your veterinarian.
- Assure that pets are appropriately vaccinated, free of parasites (this includes ticks, fleas, and intestinal worms), and fungal skin infections (e.g., ringworm).
- Keep animals that are in good health and show no evidence of disease. Healthy animals make better pets.
  - Feed pets appropriate commercial foods on a regular basis and keep fresh water available at all times.
  - Keep bedding dry and clean.
  - Clean cages daily. School or childcare staff should do this – NOT children.
  - Use a janitorial area to wash and clean cages or aquariums. DO NOT use the kitchen or food service sinks.
  - Wash hands thoroughly after contact with animals and their cages.
- Minimize contact with urine and stool. Urine and stool not confined to an enclosed cage should be cleaned up immediately. Dispose of this waste in a covered container not accessible to children.
- WASH HANDS IMMEDIATELY after handling animals and their stool/urine and their environments.
- Check with local authorities (police) for regulations in your jurisdiction for appropriate disposal of a pet when it dies.
- Avoid changing cat litter boxes, handling animals, and contacting their environments if you are pregnant.
- Cover children's sandboxes when not in use.

### Other considerations to reduce disease risks to children at petting zoos and farms

Germs can occur naturally in the gut of certain animals without causing the animal any harm. These germs are then shed into the environment in the stool of these animals. When people have contact with animals or their living areas, their hands can become contaminated. Disease spread can occur when dirty (unwashed, contaminated) hands go into the mouth or are used to eat food.

- DO NOT allow children under 5 years to have contact with farm animals. These children are at greater risk for developing severe illness because their immune systems may not yet be fully developed.
- Educate childcare and school staff about the potential for transmission of enteric (intestinal) pathogens from farm animals to humans and strategies to prevent spread. Outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7, salmonellosis, and cryptosporidiosis have been attributed to children visiting farms and petting zoos. Certain farm animals, including calves, young poultry, and ill animals, pose a greater risk for spreading enteric infections to humans.
- Apply childcare or school policies and procedures to animals brought in for show and tell, entertainment, or educational programs.

### Prevention and control

- **Wash hands to stop the spread of disease.** Immediately after contact with animals, children and adults should wash their hands. Running water, soap, and disposable towels should be available. Adults should closely monitor handwashing of all children. Wash hands after touching animals or their environments, on leaving the area in which the animals are kept, and before eating. Emphasize these recommendations with staff training and posted signs. Communal wash basins are not adequate handwashing facilities. Where running water is not available, waterless hand sanitizers provide some protection.

**Prevention and control (Continued)**

- Assure that at farms or petting zoos:
  - Two separate areas exist, one in which contact with the animals occurs and one in which animals are not allowed.
  - Food and beverages should be prepared, served, and consumed only in animal-free areas.
  - Toys and pacifiers should not be allowed in the animal contact areas.
  - Animal contact should occur only under close adult supervision.
- DO NOT consume unpasteurized milk, apple cider, or juices.
- DO NOT eat unwashed fruits and vegetables.
- Consider the type of animals and the facilities before visiting an educational farm or petting zoo.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 543-5230 or call your local health department.