

# Classroom Pets

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## The Issue: Classroom Pets

### The Argument

The placement of animals should put their best interests first. In a classroom setting, it is nearly impossible to provide animals the necessary care while also trying to look after many young human animals. When the school doors close for the day, the animals are left isolated and unattended. Often, the primary reason for teachers getting a “classroom pet” is for the children in the classroom to benefit from the entertainment and educational value obtained from the animal, whereas the primary reason when deciding to take a non-human animal into your care should always be their wellbeing.

### The Other Side

*“Classroom pets teach kids responsibility”*

Many teachers assign the care of the animal to a student for a week or a day. They argue that this teaches the children responsibility and gives them a greater appreciation for non-human animals. This argument does not hold up. By purchasing an animal for human use, you are teaching children that animals are here for human gain. Whether that gain is pleasure, entertainment, education, or any other reason, human children should not be taught that they have a right to use another animal.

Furthermore, the responsibility of taking care of an animal should not be forced on a child. Putting a child in charge of feeding, cleaning up after, entertaining, and exercising an animal is too much to ask of a child who may not want to do that. If the child does not want to care for the animal, they may not do it very well, which will lead to the suffering of the animal.

*“It creates an interactive way of structuring math problems and teaching biology”*

One argument for having a classroom pet is that math problems (such as how much food the animal will need over x number of days, or what the weight of the animal would be if fed this amount) and biology problems become much more “real world” and interactive with a living example. This argument still revolves around what humans can gain from the animal. Any argument for obtaining an animal that does not put the animal’s best interest first, is a flawed argument. There are plenty of ways to have “real world” educational problems that do not require you to purchase a living, breathing, eating, pooping, sentient animal and imprison them in a cage in your classroom, for their entire life.

*“The animal is getting taken care of, why does it matter if we use them for educational purposes”*

It is very unlikely that an animal who sits in a cage all day in your classroom is well taken care of. They may have their basic needs met, such as food and water, but that is not the same as providing an enriching, entertaining, loving environment. As a teacher, you have a responsibility to teach your students that animals are not here *for* us, but here *with* us. Animals are not here for us to use in any way, and that includes imprisoning them in our classrooms.

## **The Facts**

### **Animals Most Commonly Used as “Classroom Pets”**

- Rodents or other small mammals
  - Rabbits, hamsters, mice, chinchillas or guinea pigs.
- Fish
  - Betta fish, gold fish, etc.
- Amphibians and Reptiles
  - Turtles, lizards, snakes, frogs.
- Insects, crustaceans, birds
  - Butterflies, hermit crabs, finches, ants, spiders.

### **Many Animals Face Neglect and Abuse in the Classroom and at the Student’s Home**

When school is not open, animals are too often left unattended in the classroom overnight. Leaving an animal unattended for the majority of the day is putting their health and wellbeing at risk. Small

animals like rodents are very susceptible to heat stroke, while reptiles and other cold-blooded animals run the risk of freezing to death. If their heat lamp or pad malfunctions, it only takes a few hours for them to die, even with temperatures as high as 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

## Dangers of Weekends and Breaks

Many times, classroom pets are entrusted to the students for care over weekends and breaks. Many children's homes are not screened for proper care. The people and animals living in the home already pose a real risk to the animal. A household full of kids, other animals, and unpredictable circumstances can be a dangerous place for a defenseless animal whose life depends on proper care.

If no student or teacher can take care of the animal for an extended break, they usually end up at an overcrowded shelter where they can contract diseases and contribute to the already overwhelming homeless animal problem.

## Emergencies

In the case of a weather or life-threatening emergency it is unrealistic to think that the animal's safety will be considered at all. Realistically, a teacher's top priority will be the wellbeing of their students and the animal will be abandoned in their cage, and left for dead.

## Health Risks for Children

The most common animals used for classroom pets are prey animals who defensively bite, nip, hiss or scratch when handled or when they feel threatened. Think of your elementary- or middle school-aged class. Most of these students are unfamiliar with how to properly handle any animal, let alone one who will bite when threatened. **When you place a prey animal in your students' hands, you put their wellbeing at risk.** Some animals also carry diseases, such as *Salmonella*, that can be transmitted through saliva. **Children may also have, or develop allergies to the animal.** What will happen to that animal if they are already in your care?

## Wellbeing of the Animal

Rodents and other small mammals are prey animals who instinctively do not show when they are in distress. The animal may have a broken bone, ear infection, failing organ, or parasite and show changes in behavior that are undetectable to the untrained eye. Continuing to let them be handled by children will only exacerbate their problem and potentially put the health of the students at

risk.

Even if you are able to detect that the animal needs to be taken to the vet, are you prepared to take them there? Who will be expected to cover the cost of care? Is there even a vet in your area who will see an exotic animal, a bird, a turtle, an amphibian?

An animal's existence does not end when you go home from school. That animal remains in their cage 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

## Where Do They Come From?

- Most animals that are imprisoned in classrooms are purchased at pet stores.
- To see why purchasing animals from pet stores is wrong, take a look at our pet store sections.
- Many insects, birds, amphibians, and reptiles are taken from their natural habitat and imprisoned in classrooms.

## Animals in the Classroom Are AT RISK<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the dangers that can happen when an animal is sent home with a student, animals face danger every second they are left unsupervised even when school is in session. Below are some examples of animal neglect, abuse, and murder as reported to PETA:

- **Arlington, Texas:** A group of high school students strangled a classroom “pet” ferret to death during class, allegedly to elicit a response from their teacher.
- **Beaverton, Oregon:** A gerbil who was sent home with a student endured a broken back and died after being played with recklessly. A rabbit was killed by a dog after being sent home with another student.
- **Cape Coral, Florida:** A rabbit who was allegedly kept with three others in a wire cage at a school died after being chased during a weekend.
- **Helena, Arkansas:** A snake was stolen from his classroom enclosure and cooked to death in a school microwave.
- **Hoboken, New Jersey:** An African dwarf frog died after apparently being overfed by a kindergarten student.
- **Lawrence, Kansas:** A rabbit at the Hilltop Child Development Center died after his tail was apparently pulled off.
- **Melbourne, Victoria, Australia:** A rabbit was found decapitated and the body strewn about the campus, and a guinea pig died from shock at Smith Street Early Learning Centre.
- **Monterey, California:** A goldfish being kept as a “pet” in a middle school classroom was killed after bleach was poured into his water.

- **Orlando, Florida:** Several snails died after students purposefully shook the jars in which they were being kept. The animals were being used as part of a cruel bottle biology experiment in a science classroom.
- **Santa Rosa, California:** A hamster was tortured and killed at Northwest Prep Charter School during a break-in by five juveniles between the ages of 11 and 14.
- **Staten Island, New York:** A hamster was stolen from Eden II School during a burglary and was never recovered.
- **Tampa, Florida:** Nine gerbils died after they were deprived of food and water for more than two weeks, finches died of exposure, and a ball python froze to death in the head of the science department's classroom at Freedom High School.
- **Yorktown, Virginia:** A gerbil in a Grafton High School classroom was allegedly killed by a student who became upset. The student was charged with cruelty to animals.

## It Is Never Too Late to Do the Right Thing

**Take Them Home:** If you have already made the unfortunate choice to take an animal into your classroom, it is not too late to do the right thing. Make the compassionate decision to either bring the animal into your home, where you can more properly care for them, or to find a local animal sanctuary or forever-home where they will live out the rest of their life, happy, safe, and free of a cage. Take this teachable moment to explain to your students why this is the right thing to do.

**Change Your School Board's Policy:** Whether you are a student, teacher, or concerned faculty or parent, we must do the right thing by speaking up for the animal in danger. Write to your principal or school board members expressing your concerns, or bring it up at the next PTA meeting. Share this page, or any of the attached resources with them. Come up with a plan for the animal once they are removed from the school.

## The Lingo

- **Classroom Pet:** It is important to note that while we use the term "classroom pet" throughout this section for familiarity's sake, there is no such thing as a "classroom pet"; only animals who were purchased or stolen from their natural habitat and imprisoned in a classroom.

## The Champions

# The Resources

**<sup>1</sup>PETA Article: What's The Problem With Classroom "Pets?"**

**PETA Kids Article: 6 Reasons Having classroom pets is cruel**