

Animals in the Classroom



Introduction

Biology is the study of living things. Therefore, having living organisms in the biology classroom seems automatic. What organisms are used, however, and for what purpose may be controversial and potentially dangerous, especially with some animals.

Goals

The first consideration should be to focus on the goals for using living organisms in the classroom. The use of living materials enhances the study of living processes and is uniquely appropriate for meeting several National Science Standards. Review life science course goals and determine where the use of living materials is most appropriate. There are many valid reasons for keeping animals in the classroom, but the primary one should be to provide meaningful educational experiences for students. The presence of animals might stimulate interest, illustrate principles, develop observational skills, foster a sense of empathy, promote positive attitudes, as well as promote many other specific goals and objectives. Whatever the goals, they should be clearly stated and considered throughout the residency period of the animals in the classroom.

Responsibilities

Implicit in the use of animals in the classroom is the definite responsibility and work associated with their proper procurement, humane care, and ultimate disposal. Sound teacher judgment and concern for the well being of the animals is of prime importance. A captive animal is totally dependent upon its keeper. The keeper (teacher) assumes the responsibility for providing food and shelter and for ensuring that the animal is healthy, comfortable, and able to carry on reasonable natural behavior. The teacher, in addition to specific project goals, must also consistently exhibit a caring and sensitive attitude toward the animal.

Legal Considerations

Many native animals—especially fur-bearing animals, most birds, and threatened and endangered species—are protected by federal or state regulations and cannot be collected or maintained without a permit. Federal regulations also prohibit importation of many animals, and some states prohibit importing and keeping animals that can cause local ecological damage if released or escaped. Your state wildlife agency will be familiar with these regulations and can provide information on animals that are protected in your area. In addition, your school district may have rules and recommendations concerning classroom animals. Your principal, science coordinator, or other administrator will be familiar with your local regulations. Common sense should prevail and obviously, illegal or banned animals should not be brought into the classroom.

Considerations

Beyond the legal considerations certain general guidelines should be considered when organizing learning activities using animals.

- Every species is unique. It is important to learn as much as possible about specific organisms that are selected to study. Learn especially their habits and their unique rearing requirements. Enlist student help in researching prospective classroom organisms. Become experts before the organisms arrive!
- Some organisms bite, sting, or carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans. While these facts may not preclude keeping such animals, it does mean that all appropriate and sensible precautions must be taken. Gloves, cages, and other species-specific techniques should be available.
- Prepare all necessary materials (cultures, cages, etc.) before the arrival of the organisms. Anticipate all of the organism's needs so that upon arrival, the organisms will be treated humanely.
- Plan a timeline that allows for the arrival of the organisms prior to the day(s) they will be used in the classroom. This will allow the acclimation of the organism to its new home and allow subculturing as necessary.
- Rely on reputable biological suppliers who can provide healthy and vigorous live organisms and deliver them in a timely manner. Be sure your supplier can provide any technical help needed to assure success with the living

organism.

- Involve students in the care and maintenance of the organisms from the day of their arrival. Avoid animal activities that are beyond the capabilities and developmental level of your students.
- Open live materials shipments immediately upon arrival and follow all directions for their immediate care.
- Occasionally, a student might have an allergic reaction to a certain kind of animal or dust from an animal enclosure. If so, the student and animal should not be forced into proximity of each other.
- Do not allow imported exotic animals, wild animals, injured or stray animals, or known poisonous animals in your classroom. Bringing pets such as cats, dogs, etc. can quickly become a disaster for a variety of reasons and is strongly discouraged.
- Students should always wash their hands before and after feeding, handling or cleaning animals.
- Only healthy animals should be used. Be constantly alert to any changes in an animal's behavior or eating habits. Seek professional help from a veterinarian if a diagnosis is necessary.
- All animals must be provided with appropriate food, space, cleanliness, water, shelter, and day-to-day care.
- Although students are generally interested in animals, not all students share in the enthusiasm for animals. Be sensitive to these feelings of fear, dislike, or other specific phobias about certain animals (snakes, spiders, etc.). Never force students to become involved with an animal if they wish not to.
- Whatever the reasons for using animals in the classroom, they should not be kept any longer than is necessary to achieve the goals of their use. It is always best to remove animals from the classroom before students lose interest in them and care becomes a burden.

Disposal

When animals are no longer wanted or needed in the classroom, they must be dealt with in a responsible manner. Appropriate disposal of each living animal must be specific to its species, original source, and type. Animals that are not native to a given area or animals that have been purchased (even if they are thought to be native to an area) should **not** be released into the wild (they may suffer and die or they may become established and create serious ecological damage). Sometimes the animals can be given to someone who wants to be responsible for their care (perhaps another teacher who will use the animals in their class). Many times students will want to make an animal a personal pet. (This, of course, can be done only if the student and parents agree and are knowledgeable about the animal and its needs.) Pet stores may be potential outlets for many animals (they might even buy the animal). Pet stores often want some organisms as food for other organisms. Other local animal agencies might assist you with ideas for potential adoption of animals.

The disposal of any animal should be carefully considered before it is brought into the classroom.