Procedure for Bringing Animals into School

Ffederasiwn Ysgolion **Llanidloes** Schools Federation

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Procedure for bringing pets and other animals temporarily into school

There are occasions when animals are brought into school for a short period of time, possibly just for a day. In these circumstances, staff may not have sufficient experience of keeping and handling the animals concerned. However, it is important to be properly prepared before any visit happens and whenever possible to have a knowledgeable handler accompany any visiting animals. The CLEAPSS website has a number of documents giving advice on looking after a variety of animals' longer term.

Effective planning and organisation

Before animals are brought into school, apply some common sense.

1. Consider the age and experience of the children and possible, or predicted, responses to animals. Decide whether additional supervision will be needed. What will the children be doing whilst the animals are in school, or class?
2. Plan your instructions to the children and go through them before the visit. Explain and make clear your expectations.
3. Bringing animals to school should not be unduly stressful for the handler or the animals. The animals must be looked after as well as they would be when they are at their normal residences. If this cannot be achieved, they should not be brought in. Use the expertise of the owners, especially for exotic species, to provide the necessary guidance for the proper care of the animals.
4. Where a variety of animals will be together, think about the possibility of unwanted interactions, for example, avoid cats, dogs and fish or birds present in the same room on the same day.

Housing and food for the animals

If animals require specialist housing, for example, gerbils, snakes or spiders, that cannot be provided by the school and which is not transportable, then do not bring such animals in. It is acceptable, however, to bring suitable housing in advance of a visit so that the animal can be housed in familiar surroundings as soon as it arrives. Where animals cannot be brought into school in their normal housing, containers used to transport them must be appropriate and *retain the animal securely*.

Animals must be housed separately. Different species, or individuals of the same species from different litters, must never be placed together in the same cage, vivarium, tank etc. This will prevent diseases from passing between individuals, stop any aggressive conflict between incompatible animals and ensure that the correct animal is returned to its rightful owner.

Some animals, for example, snakes and spiders, feed irregularly, but most will require food and water. Ensure that the owner brings all necessary food and equipment with them to the school.

Providing a suitable environment for the animals

Consider carefully where to put the animals' temporary housing. Avoid the risk of overheating by keeping enclosures away from windows, and not in direct sunlight. It is also useful to plan an alternative setting where the animal can be moved to. This

will allow it to escape the noise and attention of excited children and will stop the animal from distracting the children if they are to concentrate on other work.

Handling animals

Handling needs to be managed carefully as it usually generates a great deal of excitement. It is likely that small mammals that are pets will be accustomed to being handled and will not be stressed by this. However, they will not be used to so many people at once and may react differently to handling in the classroom than they do at home. Children should be shown how to handle small mammals properly; search the CLEAPSS website for guidance on the technique that is right for a particular animal. There is always a danger that animals may be dropped, particularly by children with small hands, if the children become scared or if the animal is agile or fast moving. Handling small animals should therefore always be carried out over a table or a trough filled with a soft material such as sand or sawdust, so that the animal will not fall more than a very short distance.

Some animals are best not handled at all, for example, hamsters are nocturnal and generally do not appreciate being disturbed. Any animals that appear to be nervous should just be observed and not handled. Invertebrates, for example, stick insects and spiders, are fragile and delicate, for these, handling should always be kept to a minimum; they could easily be damaged by over-keen children, not used to handling such animals gently. An animal may best be handled only by its owner.

All of these considerations require careful organisation by the school, especially if several animals are to be brought in on the same day. Staff should be aware of the pet that a pupil intends to bring in and the problems that it might pose. Liaison with parents is very important.

Health and safety issues

Hygiene

Always wash hands (children and adults) after handling any animal (or coming into contact with the soil, bedding, water etc in an animal's housing). This is best done in the classroom where it can be supervised.
Cover cuts and abrasions on the exposed skin of hands and arms.
Ensure that suitable facilities are available (for example, paper towels) for drying hands hygienically.
Ensure that children do not put their fingers in their mouths before their hands have been washed.

Physical injuries

There is always the danger of bites and scratches, and schools should check that visiting animals are docile, friendly and gentle in the presence of (exuberant) children. This is particularly important with larger animals such as cats and dogs.

Warn children of the hazards of some animals, for example, not tormenting a sleeping hamster. Small fingers poked towards the mouths of normally non-aggressive animals may be interpreted as an offering of food and obligingly bitten. The bodies of some

large spiders are covered with many small, barbed hairs or bristles that cause irritation when they penetrate the skin, mucous membranes and especially the eyes. **Do not touch the face or eyes** if contact is made with 'hairy' spiders, or material within their housing, until the hands have been thoroughly washed.

Diseases, parasites and allergies

The likelihood of diseases being passed on to humans from pet animals is low. Farm animals, however, present a higher risk. In all cases, good hygiene will reduce the risks even further. For cats and dogs, it is sensible to check that these have been regularly taken to a vet and have been recently wormed and treated for fleas. For larger animals, including cats and dogs, it is important to provide appropriate toilet facilities. All wastes produced must be handled and disposed of hygienically, and contaminated items and surfaces properly washed and disinfected.

Allergic reactions to mammals, birds and a few other animals cannot be discounted. These might result from handling the animals or just from being near them. Possible symptoms include skin rashes, irritation to the eyes and nose or breathing difficulties. Again, washing hands soon after handling animals will help and it is important to stop children rubbing their eyes before this has been done. Check before if any children are known to have allergic reactions to animals. Ensure that these children have restricted access to animals that may trigger a response. In most cases, an allergic reaction will subside once the animal and the afflicted person are kept apart. In extreme cases, seek medical advice.

Phobias

Schools should be aware that children and adults may have phobias of certain animals, for example, dogs, snakes and spiders. This is *not* to say that such animals should not be brought into schools. However, the fears that may be expressed should be respected and efforts made to segregate the animals from people with phobias.

Sources of visiting animals

Pets and farm animals

Children, or staff, sometimes want to bring their own pets into school to show them to others or because the animals fit in with a teaching topic. Some schools organise an 'animal club' for keen children who help to look after the school's animals. Club members might additionally bring in their own animals for short periods. Schools sometimes arrange 'animal days' when children (normally from one class) bring in their pets; such events pose problems because of the sheer number and variety of animals. It is not unknown for schools in rural communities to have new-born lambs, chicks and ducks visiting. Make sure the owner (or another skilled individual) accompanies them and is on hand throughout the visit.

Visiting animal schemes

There are commercial organisations or individuals that, for a fee, take a variety of animals into schools. When planning to use such a scheme, do what you can to check the scheme's provenance. Enquire about actions the school need to do to prepare,

and about any risk assessments. Make sure you know what will happen on the day of the visit.

Some employers have misgivings about such schemes; fearing that the animals in the collection, although not deliberately ill-treated, may be harmed or stressed by the regular movement from place to place and repeated exposure to, or handling by, groups of enthusiastic pupils. Some schemes ensure that they have several individuals for each species in the collection. In this way, when one animal is being shown to children in schools, its companions are 'resting'. Before deciding to invite in a visiting animal organiser, it might be worth enquiring whether such a system is in operation.

It is essential to obtain information about the animals that will be shown, to identify if there are likely to be any problems, such as phobias to particular species or the development of allergies. The discussion on handling animals and health and safety issues in the previous section is also likely to be relevant here, and good hygiene will be crucial.

Various conservation trusts, in promoting their organisations or publicising their work, may bring 'rescued' wild animals into schools. Make sure that such animals, for example, hedgehogs or owls, have been kept in captivity for some time and that they have been treated for diseases transmissible to humans (if applicable) and parasites, such as fleas. If you are unsure about any such animal don't let the children handle it.

Animals from local habitats

Land invertebrates

Invertebrate animals, such as woodlice, snails and earthworms, are often brought into schools for short-term studies. While kept indoors, ensure that they are kept in cool, damp and dark conditions, which equate with their natural surroundings. Note that it is not easy to keep *carnivorous* invertebrates, such as centipedes or spiders, for extended periods because of the difficulty of providing them with live food.

Aquatic animals

Fish, such as minnows, from local streams should be kept in pond water that is cool, well aerated and provided with a supply of live food. If kept for any length of time, refer to specialist texts on cold-water fish for guidance.

If sampling animals from ponds, streams or rivers, there may be a possibility that the water has been contaminated with the bacteria that cause Weil's disease. Good hygiene is essential. Search the CLEAPSS website for specific guidance on pond dipping and Weil's disease.

Amphibians

In spring, the spawn of *common* species of frog, toad and newt (ie, **not** the great crested newt nor the natterjack toad) are often studied in schools. This is acceptable and perfectly legal, but only *small* amounts of spawn should be taken and the tadpoles are best reared in water that is aerated and filtered (search the CLEAPSS website for specific guidance on tadpoles and frogs). In this way, the maximum number of tadpoles will survive to become young adults for release into a suitable environment (preferably the pond where the spawn was taken from).

Birds and mammals

The school should already have a view on the presence of guide/hearing/assistance dogs in schools. In the main, these present no problems or issues.

Wild birds and mammals, dead or alive, are best not brought into schools, even if legal to do so, because they may be harbouring diseases or carrying parasites such as fleas, lice or worms that could be transmissible to humans (or resident animals). They may also inflict physical injuries. However, this recommendation does not stop children arriving with injured animals that they have found. While such animals are on the school premises, guard against the possible risk of disease and parasite transmission. Isolate the injured animal from resident small mammals and birds and keep it in quiet, dimly-lit conditions. Handle the animal as little as possible, with due regard for personal health and safety. Wash hands immediately afterwards if it has not been appropriate or possible to protect the hands by wearing suitable gloves.

Children may have unrealistic expectations of school staff; they often want the injured animal to be nursed back to full health and released into the wild. Unfortunately, this may not be possible without expert help and the most appropriate action may be the immediate humane killing of the animal. Staff in schools will rarely have the expertise, facilities or willingness to achieve this, and may not even be able to assess the condition of the animal. At the earliest opportunity, to avoid prolonging the animal's suffering, take the injured animal to a local vet or an animal welfare clinic run by the PDSA or RSPCA. Schools are advised, *in anticipation of the arrival of an animal in distress*, to check out the local assistance available before any arrive. Vets are commercial businesses. Ask if they will charge to treat such wild animals or put them to sleep.

Dissuade pupils from bringing in young animals that they have found 'abandoned'; the animals' parents are often not far away and will generally retrieve their offspring as soon as the unwelcome intruder has moved on.

If wild mammals are to be the subject of a trapping investigation, they must be handled with care, wearing gloves which provide protection from contamination and bites or scratches.

Animals to avoid

Obviously dangerous animals, such as leopards, monkeys, crocodiles and poisonous snakes, should not be brought into schools. Such animals are governed by the *Dangerous Wild Animals Act* which makes it an offence to possess such animals without a licence.

Endangered species should also not be brought into school, though it may be difficult for school staff to identify which organisms are fully protected by the *Wildlife & Countryside Act*. Under the Act, there are different levels of protection given to different species. Those with full protection (which includes: dormice, all bats, all wild birds and their eggs, the great crested newt and natterjack toad, the smooth snake and sand lizard, and a variety of rare invertebrates) must never be taken from the wild. Lower levels of protection make it illegal to kill or injure an animal. For some species, it is only illegal to take them from the wild and sell them without a licence. For such animals, it is legal to bring them into school, though other considerations, discussed

above, may rule against this. For details of which animals are protected, go to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) website.

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