



# Pets in the Child Care Setting

Many child care providers who care for children in their homes have pets, and many centers include pets as part of their educational program. Pets can be excellent companions. They meet the emotional needs of children and adults for love and affection. Caring for pets also gives children an opportunity to learn how to be gentle and responsible for others. Contact with pets can be fun and teach children about life, death and unconditional love. However, child care providers need to know about potential health and safety risks before making the decision to keep pets in child care.

## What are the health and safety risks?

**Allergies:** Many children are allergic to animals and may have symptoms when they are around them. About 25 percent of allergic people are sensitive to dogs or cats, and cats generally cause more allergy problems than dogs. A child who is allergic to dogs or cats may also be sensitive to other common pets such as rabbits, guinea pigs or hamsters.

**Injuries:** Dog and cat bites are the most reported types of injuries caused by pets. The tearing and puncture wounds they produce can also cause infections.

**Infections:** Certain animals carry viruses, bacteria and other potential infections that can be passed on to people. Diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people are called zoonotic diseases. Zoonotic diseases can spread through direct contact with infected animals or their stool, insects that bite or live on animals, and infections that live in the environment where the animal lives.

## What are some diseases we can catch from animals?

**Salmonellosis:** This disease is caused by salmonella bacteria and transmitted to humans by eating food contaminated with the feces of an infected pet. Many animals, such as chickens, iguanas, geckos and turtles are carriers of salmonella, but do not appear ill themselves.

**Rabies** is usually a viral infection of wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, bats and foxes, but can spread to domestic animals and humans by a bite or scratch.

**Diarrhea** can be caused by *Campylobacter* and parasites such as giardia, and is associated with infected dogs, cats, birds and farm animals.

**Cat-scratch disease** causes fever and swollen glands, and is usually transmitted by kittens.

**Ringworm** is a fungal skin infection which can be spread from dogs, cats, rabbits and guinea pigs.

**Toxoplasmosis** can affect anyone, but is very dangerous to unborn babies, causing birth defects. Humans catch this illness through contact with cat waste.

**Psittacosis**, an illness like pneumonia, can be transmitted by infected parrots and other exotic birds.

## Who is at higher risk?

Pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with weak immune systems such as those born with inherited immune deficiencies, AIDS/HIV and those receiving chemotherapy, are at higher risk of catching zoonotic diseases.

## Which animals are not appropriate?

Some pets, particularly exotic pets such as iguanas, turtles, snakes, spiders and tropical fish may not be appropriate for the child care setting. Aggressive dogs especially hybrid wolf-dogs that have become increasingly popular in recent years, are potentially dangerous to humans, including their owners. Check with a veterinarian if you are unsure whether a particular pet is appropriate for children, and check with the local health department for regulations and advice regarding pets in child care. Venomous or poisonous animals are not appropriate for young children to handle under any circumstances.

## What can you do to protect the health and safety of children?

To minimize the health and safety risks associated with pets, child care providers can take the following steps:

### Reduce the risk of allergy problems

- If your child care setting has a pet, tell parents before they enroll a child, in case allergies may require the parents to make other child care arrangements.
- Do not bring animals into rooms used by children whose asthma is triggered by animals.
- To control allergy risks, confine the pets to a limited area that you can clean easily. Keeping the animal clean and brushed helps, too.

### Protect children from injury and bites

Children commonly treat animals as if they were humans. They may hug or hit them or expect them to behave like another child and cause an aggressive response. These expectations increase when they observe that adults give animals human-sounding names, treat animals like people and tell stories about animals that act like humans. To prevent injuries:

- Before bringing and introducing any animal, learn about the usual behavior of that type of animal and get to know the individual pet. Since children's behavior can threaten an animal, be sure you know how the animal behaves when frightened.
- Make sure that children are introduced to pets in a quiet, controlled setting.
- Teach children how to behave around pets. They need to learn not to feed or provoke the pet, and that removing the pet's food or disturbing a sleeping pet upsets them. Always keep their faces and fingers away from a pet's mouth, beak or claws.
- All pets, whether kept indoors or outside, must be in good health, show no evidence of disease, and be friendly toward children.
- Child care providers must be present when children play with animals. Be ready to remove a child immediately if an animal shows signs of distress or the child treats the animal inappropriately.
- Keep pet food and dishes out of children's reach.
- Do not let children pet an animal that is in a cage, pen or tied up. Children should not put their fingers through openings in a cage.

- Do not let children interact with a mother animal or her babies while she is with them.

### Prevent infections

- Children and providers should wash their hands after contact with any animal, its belongings or cage.
- Dogs or cats should be appropriately immunized (check with the veterinarian) and be kept on flea, tick and worm control programs. Proof of immunizations should be kept in a safe place.
- Keep your pets clean. Dogs and cats use their tongues to clean themselves, so try to discourage pets from licking the children and vice versa.
- Keep pet living quarters clean; dispose of pet waste immediately. Litter boxes should never, ever be accessible to children. Keep children away from areas where animals urinate.
- Keep sandboxes covered when not in use to prevent pets from using them as litter boxes.
- Pregnant providers should avoid contact with cat feces; someone else should dispose of cat litter daily.
- Teach children to avoid wild animals when taking hikes, walks or field trips.

## What should you do if an animal bites a child in your care?

- Remove the animal to a secure setting away from children.
- Notify parents at once.
- Get medical help immediately if the wound is large, deep or bleeding heavily.
- Use disposable gloves and wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.
- Control bleeding, elevate the body part that was bitten, and apply a clean bandage.

### References

*Prevention of Infectious Disease*, California Childcare Health Program, 2001.

*Early Childhood Health Link*, American Academy of Pediatrics.

*Pets and Kids*, Susan S. Aronson, MD.

*The ABCs of Safe and Healthy Child Care*, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

By A. Rahman Zamani, MPH (September 19, 2001)