



Australian Children's  
Education & Care  
Quality Authority

## QUALITY AREA 3

# KEEPING PETS AND ANIMALS IN EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

Having a pet at your service gives children the opportunity to observe, interact and learn about animals. It can be a valuable part of a child's education and care experience, enriching their learning about nature, ecology and relationships.

While there are many benefits to keeping animals in a service, there are also a range of issues that educators need to consider for the safety and well-being of both the children and the animals.



### LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

**Standard 3.3** of the National Quality Standard (NQS) requires the service to take an active role in caring for its environment and contribute to a sustainable future.

[The Guide to the National Quality Standard](#) encourages educators to understand and appreciate the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land (p.100).

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Observing, interacting with and learning to care for an animal can be a valuable part of a child's education and care experience, enriching their learning.

Encouraging direct contact and developing bonds with animals, can help children build empathy (Thompson and Gullone, 2003, p.175). Providing children with access to animals in an education and care service can help them learn about the life cycle and relationships, and improve communication.

Contemporary thinkers, such as Bone (2013), put forward the notion of 'animals as the fourth teacher' building on the work of Malaguzzi in the town of Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi's ideology positions the parent as the child's first teacher, the educator as the second and the environment as the third teacher, emphasising the crucial role they all play in supporting children's learning.

With this in mind, consider ways that including animals in your service's program can support children's learning, particularly in relation to:

**Outcome 1:** Children have a strong sense of identity: Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.

**Outcome 2:** Children are connected with and contribute to their world: Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment.

(Early Years Learning Framework, Framework For School Age Care)

# ANIMALS AS THE FOURTH TEACHER, 'THE ANIMAL IS A CONDUIT FOR LEARNING TO BE HUMAN: SOME PROPOSE THAT IT IS ONLY THROUGH THE ANIMAL THAT WE RECOGNISE OUR HUMANITY'

(Jill BONE (2013))

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PET FOR YOUR SERVICE

If your service has never kept an animal before, it is important that you discuss the possibility with all families at your service. This ensures parents are able to give feedback about the decision as well as provide you with information about any allergies, fears or phobias their child may have. All of this information should be taken into consideration before you decide on the right animal for your service.

Keeping animals is not appropriate for every service and there are other interesting ways to introduce animals to children. For example, have an outing to a wildlife park. You can also have visitors and programs in your service such as mobile farms, reptile keepers and egg hatching programs.

Questions to consider include:

- Who will pay for the care and upkeep of the animal, including feeding, health care and cleaning?
- How will the animal be cared for on weekends and during service closure periods?
- What physical space is available in the service? Is it adequate for the animal you are thinking of?
- Are all educators and families happy with the decision to keep an animal at the service?
- What time will be available throughout the day to care for the animal or will educators be asked to give up some personal time for this?
- Are there any children or educators at your service who are allergic to, or have phobias of, animals?
- What changes to your service's policies and procedures need to be considered? For example, your hand washing policy will need to be updated to include washing hands after having contact with the animal.
- What are the health and safety risks?

Other things to consider include:

- Some animals, such as lizards, turtles, snakes, spiders and tropical fish may not be an appropriate choice. Check with a veterinarian if you are unsure whether a particular animal is suitable for children, and check with the local health department for regulations and advice regarding animals in education and care services. Some states and territories require a license for keeping certain animals.
- Animals that may be more likely to be suitable for education and care services may include goldfish, hermit crabs, stick insects, mice or rats. All of these animals are relatively low maintenance and can be left safely over a weekend if they are provided with sufficient food and water.

## ASSESSING AND MANAGING RISKS

It is widely recognised that while there are many benefits to providing children with access to animals and keeping pets in education and care services, there are issues that approved providers and educators need to consider for the safety and wellbeing of both the children and the animals concerned. A risk / benefit analysis should be conducted when deciding the type of animal and the way the children engage with it.

### Disease

Access to animals in an education and care service requires special consideration to prevent the spread of infectious diseases because contact with animals can spread disease. Health authorities identify that germs can be present on the skin, hair, feathers and scales, and in the faeces, urine and saliva of animals. While these germs may not cause disease in the animal, they may cause disease in humans.

### Effective hand washing and cleaning

Children and adults should employ effective hand washing after touching or feeding animals, or cleaning their bedding, tanks, cages or enclosures. Cleaning of bedding, tanks, cages or enclosures can be part of the learning experience.

### Appropriate supervision

Children should also be appropriately supervised when they have contact with animals to avoid potential injury or harm to the child or the animal.

## WHAT OTHER STANDARDS OR REGULATIONS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED?

Your service should consider other standards relating to children's access to animals including:

- animal welfare and ethics policies, legislation and standards
- local, state or territory government licensing requirements (for example, for the keeping of reptiles or fresh water turtles, or limits on the number of chickens)
- policies and regulations that apply to services delivered through the government school system.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER FOR ASSESSMENT AND RATING

Authorised officers may look for and discuss a range of different practices which demonstrate that educators value children's agency. They might also look for how this is reinforced through the service's policies and the educational program.

Assessors may observe:

- Educators modelling appropriate behaviour and supporting children during interactions with animals
- Children being adequately supervised
- Educators modelling appropriate hygiene and safety practices.

Assessors may discuss:

- How children are supported to interact with the animals
- How families were consulted
- How the ages, skill levels and preferences of individual children are considered and respected.

Assessors may sight:

- Philosophy and policy relevant to the context of the service such as how is the animal fed, how the space is cleaned, what provisions are in place for the animal when the service is closed.
- Documentation gathered from consultation with families
- Risk / benefit assessment documents
- Documentation to manage potential allergies or medical conditions.

To determine policy guidelines which best promote children's health and safety, a service may consider issues such as:

- any federal, state or territory legislative requirements, including public health, animal welfare and health and safety
- developing practices to support a safe environment and minimise risk
- the welfare of animals in a service
- any known potential allergies or illnesses that children may suffer as a result of coming into contact with animals
- the families and children's comfort levels
- the ages of the children and their skills and abilities
- maintaining hygiene where children and animals share the same space
- risk assessment processes
- acknowledging the value of children's learning to care for animals safely and humanely.

Policies and procedures should be developed in collaboration with all stakeholders and should be developed to realistically support the co-existence of pets and children.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Bone, J. (2013) The animals as the fourth educator: A literature review of animals and young children in pedagogical relationships *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(2) Deakin West ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

Elliott, S. (2012) Sustainable outdoor playspaces in early childhood centres Investigating perceptions, facilitating change and generating theory. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of New England, Armidale NSW.

Thompson, K. & Gullone, E. (2003) Promotion of empathy and prosocial behaviour in children through humane education. *Australian Psychologist*, 38 (3). Department of Psychology, Monash University: Victoria, Australia.

More information is available on the ACECQA website [acecqa.gov.au](http://acecqa.gov.au)

The information in this publication was adapted from a National Childcare Accreditation Council resource.

