

by Susan S. Aronson, MD

## Going Barefoot and Having Animals in Child Care

*Ask  
Dr. Sue*

### Can children go barefoot in child care?

Barefoot experiences are learning opportunities. Shoes protect the feet from contact with sources of injury, but they also inhibit foot movement and contact with the environment. Without shoes, children can feel the tickle of grass and the ooze of mud between their toes. Dark surfaces are warmer and light surfaces cooler to walk on. Painting with your toes and feet is fun. Swimming, wading, and sprinkler play usually call for bare feet.

However, when children go barefoot, many injuries occur. Limit barefoot play to situations where the surfaces are safe. Sharp objects, stinging insects, and excessively hot surfaces can cause foot injury. If you are uncertain about the safety of the surfaces and the environment during water play, consider having the children wear old sneakers that can get wet. Another option is to use water shoes or water socks that you can buy in some sporting goods stores.

### What precautions should caregivers follow to have animals in child care?

Pets and young children have several common and incompatible behaviors. Both get excited in new situations, lose self-control when stressed, and protect themselves by hurting others. Some pets also have their own special health and behavior problems.

Any pet or animal present in a child care facility, indoors or outdoors, should be healthy and friendly. A consultation with a veterinarian can identify health problems that might cause difficulty for children. For example, puppies and kittens carry infections that can cause a variety of serious diseases in children.

Before allowing an animal in child care, look closely at what you will have to do. The standards for involving animals in child care are described in **Caring for Our Children**, the national health and safety standards for out-of-home care of children of the American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics (APHA/AAP). Dogs and cats should be fully immunized and on a flea, tick, and worm control program. Banned pets include: ferrets, turtles, birds of the parrot family, wild, dangerous, or potentially aggressive animals. Food preparation, food storage, and eating areas are off limits to all animals.

Having an animal in a child care facility may be a lot of work for a limited benefit. The APHA/AAP standards require written procedures for care and maintenance of pets kept on the premises. For animals that require vaccines, you must have proof of current immunization, signed by a veterinarian. Pets must be confined to a safe and supervised area in the child care facility. Freely roaming animals leave droppings and enter areas where they do not belong. Without confinement of an animal, you cannot monitor its interaction with children closely enough.

Whatever type of cage you choose, keep it clean and sanitary. You'll need to clean living quarters for animals often to keep waste to a minimum. Choose animal cages with removable bottoms for easier cleaning. Animal litter boxes and food supplies must be inaccessible to children. When you clean the living quarters of animals, you must use methods that keep humans from contact with animal waste. Handling animal waste requires the same precautions as diaper handling. Before bringing the animal to the facility, it's a good idea to review all the procedures and set-up plans with a local health authority.

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For short-term pet visitors, supervision of child contact with animals places a heavy burden on caregivers. A caregiver must always directly monitor the interaction of the children and animals. You'll need to teach the children how to behave and physically restrain children to keep the animals calm. Children should not provoke or startle the animals, or remove their food. Especially for visiting animals, you must have a place where the animal can go to be away from the children if the animal becomes upset.

Remember that furry pets can stimulate allergic reactions in some children. Removing an animal after you find out about an allergy is traumatic. Be sure to ask whether children or close family members have problems with allergies or asthma. A child who has been playing with an animal may take allergy-causing material home. A few hairs can give symptoms to an allergy or asthma-prone family member.

Having an animal in a group child care setting is different from having a pet in the intimacy of one's own home. Animals need protection from abuse by children. Consider the risk of allergy, injury, and infection before bringing an animal into the child care facility. Trips to the zoo and visits by qualified animal handlers may be a better way to include animals in the child care experience.

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If you have a child care health question you would like Dr. Susan Aronson to answer in a future column, please write to her c/o Exchange Press, PO Box 2890, Redmond, WA 98073.