



## Pets in the Child Care Setting

*Prepared by the Health Consultant Team at Child Care Aware® of North Dakota*

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 & safety risks?

**Allergies:** Many children are allergic to animals and may have symptoms when they are around them. About 25 percent of people with allergies 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.

### What 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 your licenser 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 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 injuries 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.

- 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.
- Do not leave children unsupervised with pets – providers need to be present so they can intervene if the animal is harming a child or if the child is treating the animal inappropriately. Check rooms where children are napping to make sure pets are not present.
- Dogs have attacked infants in swings because they think it is a game.

### 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.
- Litter boxes should never, ever be accessible to children or in the same room where children eat, sleep or play.
- 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.
- Children and providers should wash their hands after handling any pet food/treats. Dry pet food/treats has been found to contain Salmonella. Children under the age of 5 years are not recommended to handle pet food/treats.
- Pet food and water dishes should be kept separate from kitchen sink for filling and washing to prevent spread of illness.
- Pet toys, rawhides and bones should be kept out of reach of children.
- Pet leashes should be kept out of reach of children to prevent strangulation.

### Petting Zoos

- The CDC recommends that children under 5 years of age avoid contact with animals at petting zoos.
- For older children and adults, handwashing is recommended after direct contact with animals.

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

- Remove the animal to a secure setting away from children.
- If you don't know the animal, and you do it safely, capture or confine the animal so it can be evaluated. If you cannot capture/confine the animal, note the size and appearance of the animal.
- Use disposable gloves and wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.
- If the skin is broken, control bleeding by applying pressure and/or elevating the body part that was bitten.
- Apply ice or cold pack over a cloth for swelling. (5 minutes is sufficient. If the child is not upset by the ice/cold pack, can apply up to a maximum of 20 minutes).
- Gently pat dry. Cover with sterile bandage. Remember that written parental permission is required before applying any antibiotic ointment
- Notify the parents as soon as possible.
- If the skin is broken, recommend that the child be evaluated by a health care provider. Medical attention is critical if there is a chance that the child has been exposed to rabies.
- Complete an incident report.
- In the days to follow, watch the area closely for signs of infection - REDNESS, WARM TO TOUCH, DRAINAGE, or FEVER. If any of these symptoms occur, the parents should be notified as soon as possible. The child needs to see a physician for treatment as soon as possible.

### Licensing Rules and Regulations

- The provider shall ensure that only small pets that are contained in an aquarium or other approved container, cats, and dogs are present in areas occupied by children.
- Wire cages are not approved containers. Other indoor pets and animals must be restricted by a solid barrier and must not be accessible to children.
- The department may restrict any pet or animal from the premises that may pose a risk to children or may approve additional pets that do not pose a health or safety risk to children.
- The provider shall ensure that animals are maintained in good health and are appropriately immunized. Pet immunizations must be documented with a current certificate from a veterinarian.
- The provider shall ensure parents are aware of the presence of pets and animals in the family child care.
- The provider shall notify parents immediately if a child is bitten or scratched and skin is broken.
- Pets, pet feeding dishes, cages and litter boxes are not to be in any food preparation, food storage, or serving areas.
- The provider shall ensure that the child care indoor and outdoor areas accessible to children are free of animal excrement.

#### References:

*Adapted from Pets in the Child Care Setting, California Childcare Health Program, University of California, San Francisco School of Nursing.*

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