Pets in the Classroom Curriculum

Because the pets in my classroom are an integral part of my learning environment I like to integrate learning about them into my curriculum. The enrichment they provide to my students is not just reflected in science but instead stretches throughout my classroom learning experience through language, art, math, music, movement, geography and a wide scope of life sciences. Through hands-on learning and discussion the pets in my classroom become the focus of my classroom with children writing letters to them on spring break and bringing them treats from home. For the children not in my classroom they are a detour that parents gladly make throughout the year.

To begin I like to introduce the pets both to the students and the parents. With the students I bring the pets out of their cages/enclosures and ask questions about what the children observe. I want my students to understand what type of animal it is, what type of body covering it has, how it moves, how many legs it has and whether it has a tail or not. With the parents besides providing information in the classroom about the pet I also like to highlight each pet in my monthly newsletter to families. This can encourage discussion between parent and child about each pet and open the door for parents who are looking for ways to connect with their child and find
out what they did in the classroom. As the children become better acquainted with each pet they will be able to make comparisons between not only the variety of pets in the classroom but also their own pets, pets they are familiar with, pets they have seen at the pet store or on TV. Analyzing and comparing data encourages math and science as well as building language skills necessary in the describing and comparing various animals. For my preschool class this is an introduction into the Animal Kingdom and how animals are broken up into different family groups. Placing our pets into these family groups provides the children with a sense of order and is easily relatable for them when they think about their place in their own family group.

Once I have introduced each pet then we can move on to habitat and diet. Again we want to discuss and compare looking at how each environment suits the specific needs of that pet. A hands-on way to incorporate this into your classroom
environment is in your sensory table. I like to create small world environments with natural materials and small animal models that are safe for the children to handle, explore and manipulate. Small blue pebbles can be water, shavings a forest floor and silk leaves the plants and trees of the forest. These sensory table habitats should include many small pieces for interaction and building. In the forest small world environment that I created I included small river rocks, sticks, small pinecones and acorns for imaginative play and building along with many forest animal replicas. Another way to incorporate habitat into your classroom is to create a bulletin board display that reflects a snap shot of the habitat. This bulletin board will come alive as children create art that reflects plants, animals and insects from this habitat.

Incorporating learning about your classroom pets’ diet is essential to your class’ learning about the whole pet and opens the door to more life science learning experiences. For pets that eat insects in my class I like to explore the life cycle of that insect. Mealworms are an easy life cycle for the class to observe and understand and usually lead my class to further investigate other insect life cycles.
For my pets that eat primarily fruits, vegetables and grains I take the learning outside to our garden where we plant and grow foods specifically for our herbivores. This discussion of diet will naturally lead you to a discussion about plant eaters versus meat eaters and is the perfect time to introduce new vocabulary to our learning. By giving my students the correct vocabulary: herbivore, carnivore and omnivore, I’m empowering them to look at science as fun not scary giving them a positive attitude as they move forward in school.

I like to provide opportunities for my students to use art materials that reflect our pets in the classroom. For example I may have them paint on sandpaper comparing the rough texture to that of our pet Bearded Dragon Norbert or explore his patterns by using small objects to print with on a lizard shaped cut-out. By using a variety of collage materials I open up discussion about how each of our pets body coverings feel perhaps they are soft or hard or maybe they are furry or feathery and they might also feel rough or smooth. I like to provide rubbing plates to introduce concepts of pattern and also texture. But some of the best discoveries come from the students themselves when given free time to explore the art supplies they will often try to draw or paint our classroom pets and which illustrates to me the impact our pets have on the children in our class.

As I stated before integrating the pets of our classroom into our whole classroom curriculum is important to creating a rich learning environment so I would like to share how I use our pets to enhance our mathematical learning. We begin by
comparing and contrasting our pets by their appearance but we can also compare them by their size. Creating outlines of the pets for the children to measure with rulers and other non-standard measuring tools like Unifix cubes or Learning Links makes math fun. Another math opportunity with the pet outlines is to try and see how many small counters will be needed to fill the shape. The children can also be challenged to find objects that appear to be about the same size as the outline perhaps a foot or a hand looks about the same size as our Guinea Pig Penelope’s outline. Weighing the pets and then comparing their weight to that of the children or the other pets gives the children an opportunity to look at numbers and make decisions about which number is larger or smaller, heavier or lighter. The children also like to be challenged to find objects in the class that are the same weight as the pet. I like to take the pet outlines before I introduce them for measurement and have the children guess which class pet it is only by the shape. Another fun game that challenges the children’s spatial awareness is to photograph each pet and only reveal a small window or hole of the picture and see if the children can guess which class pet it is.

Integrating our pets into the classroom also includes making them part of our music, movement and dramatic play. The variety of pets in our class provides us with a variety of noises that we can try to recreate with musical instruments. Our Tree Frogs Robin and Kermit have a call that can be recreated with tone blocks and mallets while our Fire Bellied Toads Spiderfrog and Bingo sound more like the rubbing of sand blocks. Our Guinea Pig Penelope’s whistle is high like a tuning fork or triangle. As I introduce new instruments I give the children the opportunity to recreate or mimic the sounds of our pets which enables me to introduce the concepts of high, low, pitch, speed and tone. For movement we often pretend we
are one of the animals imitating their movements by walking or crawling like they do. This encourages dramatic play that can be continued by the children during free play. To encourage another type of dramatic play I like to provide props and set up different role play environments such as a Pet Shop or Veterinarian Office. This can also be done in the block area with the addition of rubber replica animals, stuffed animals or puppets. In the block area various props can also be added to encourage not only role playing but also habitat design.

These are just a few examples of how I incorporate the pets in my classroom into our learning curriculum, but one of the biggest impacts our pets offer the children in my classroom is the opportunity to love another living creature, take responsibility for their safety, health and well-being. I teach the kids right from the beginning that they are stewards and it is their duty to be respectful, nurturing and kind to the pets in our classroom. Lessons of empathy and compassion come naturally when you have children interacting with pets on a daily basis. In my opinion that is one of the best lessons we can share with young children.

Lessons and ideas by Heather Remund lead teacher Barton House Playschool, Redlands, CA.

My classroom currently has the following pets- a Guinea Pig, 2 Parakeets (one male, one female), 2 Fire Bellied Toads, 2 Baja California Tree Frogs, a male Bearded Dragon, 3 Hissing Cockroaches, a multitude of Walking Stick insects and an aquarium with 3 Neon Tetras and 3 Zebra Danios. It is alive with learning!