
GUIDELINES

RECIPIENTS: School principals

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OBJECT: Presence of domestic animals in class and at school

School Boards, through their educational, pedagogical and social mission, expand their vision and adapt their programs and services according to the needs of their school clientele. However, every new activity entails additional risks for the school board.

Even if animals are pleasant to have around and contribute to the achievement of certain pedagogical objectives, their presence at school can be associated with several health problems.

This is the case with the presence of domestic animals in school and in class.

Article 1466 of the Civil Code of Quebec specifies this:

« The owner of an animal is bound to make reparation for injury it has caused, whether the animal was under his custody or that of a third person, or had strayed or escaped.

A person making use of the animal is also, during that time, liable therefore together with the owner.. »

In light of this article, it is therefore practically impossible to try to exonerate oneself from this type of responsibility in the event of a lawsuit.

Presence of domestic animals in a school environment

On the advice of the Public Health Minister and the *Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de la Montérégie*, it is preferred that animals be removed from schools unless their presence is judged as **essential** in attaining objectives.

Allergy risks

The presence of animals in a school environment could be responsible for numerous health problems for students and staff. The most significant risk faced by people exposed to animals is that of developing an allergy. These allergic reactions can manifest themselves as asthma, rhinitis and hives. Dandruff, saliva, feathers, hair and animal excrement can all be at the root of the problem. Protein allergens from animals are easily inhaled and travel to the bronchi and, ultimately, provoke an asthma attack. **Once protein allergens reach the bronchi it can take years before they are reabsorbed even after the environment has been controlled.**

Animal allergies are common and the prevalence of the problem increases with age. Whereas the percentage of children 4 years or less showing an allergy to cats and dogs is 12 %, **the proportions climb to 30 % with adolescents.**

With time allergies can develop among both the children and the adults who are exposed to the animal's environment. Allergic asthma attributed to animals is currently recognized by the CSST as an occupational disease.

The most common animals that affect allergy sufferers are cats and dogs, however, we cannot leave out such small rodents as hamsters, rabbits, mice and rats, as well as birds, in particular parakeets, parrots and doves. Contrary to popular opinion, **there are no hypoallergenic animals.**

The risk of injury

Furthermore, in a school context, there is a strong possibility that the animal if placed in a situation «of anxiety or difficulty » by the students, could display unpredictable behaviour thus presenting a physical danger to the students, therefore, elevating the risk of a civil suit for the school board. Animal bites are the most common cause. Even if the lesions are often benign, they can become infected, can sometimes leave scars and can even have a dramatic effect.

The risk of infection

Certain infectious diseases can be transmitted through skin contact, bites, scratches or inhalation.

Zoonoses are infections transmitted from animals to humans. Due to the type of contact that the children have with the animal there is a higher risk of them contracting zoonoses, especially those transmitted through contact with an animal's stool. Occasionally, the dangers of infection are obvious, for example when the animal's excrement is present. However, the animal's fur and saliva can also transmit germs. The danger of infection is less apparent, but present just the same. Moreover, even animals seemingly in good health can be infected and can transmit an infection.

Air quality

Considering, that the *ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche* (MEESR) recommends establishing a systematic approach for managing air quality, the

school board and its' schools must take steps to ensure the maintenance of an optimal indoor air quality for its occupants. The air quality in an establishment is assessed according to the parameters relating to the ventilation, the temperature and the presence or absence of contaminants produced by the occupants (notably animals), their activities, equipment, furnishings and construction materials.

Childcare

Article 109 of the Educational Childcare Regulation prohibits the presence of animals (including fish) in childcare, with the exception of family childcare.

For these reasons, and without any exception, the school board does not allow keeping animals at school on a permanent basis.

However, on a case by case basis, a Principal (refer to the Secretary General in doubt) could allow an animal in school, for a short period of time, in strict accordance with the following rules:

- ✓ Preceding the animal's visit, a note must be sent home to parents. It is **important** to know ahead of time if there are any students with allergies or phobias.
- ✓ Give the students clear written instructions concerning their expected behaviour toward the animals in order to avoid accidents.
- ✓ In order to minimize the risk of diseases being transmitted to the students, animals brought to the school must be clean and in good health and must stay in a designated area. However, the animal at the origin of the infection can normally look to be in good health.
- ✓ Lessen the time that animals are present in the school.
- ✓ Vaccinations and health: dogs and cats that come to the school must have a vaccination certificate for rabies. They should be well cared for, housetrained, in good health with no internal parasites or external problems such as fleas.
- ✓ Because the animals could react in an unusual and quick manner in new situations. This should be included in the instructions given to the students. Fear could cause an animal, that finds itself in an unusual situation, to try and escape or even to become aggressive. Dogs and cats must wear an appropriate collar or harness and must be kept on a leash while on school grounds so they may be easily controlled. The owner or the person in charge of the animal must remain close to it all times during the visit.

- ✓ Rabbits do not like to be picked up. They will use their strong hind legs to try to escape, likely causing deep scratches on the arms, hands and face.
- ✓ Animals or birds must not be allowed to freely wander or fly around the room.
- ✓ Hands must be washed with soap and hot water **immediately** after touching the animal.
- ✓ Students must not eat during the time they are handling the animals or while other students in the room are playing with the animals.
- ✓ The animals must not be allowed near the sinks where the students wash their hands or where they drink water.
- ✓ The use of turtles, reptiles and amphibians must be prohibited, since they are often associated with gastro-intestinal infections (salmonellosis).

Finally, in case of doubt, we invite you to contact the Secretary General. If necessary, we will check with the insurer and if needed, with the agency selected for this purpose by the Health Minister.

After the animal has been removed from the school or relocated to another room set up for that purpose, allergen particles can persist in the environment for several weeks, even after normal cleaning methods have been used.

Other alternatives could therefore be considered by the teacher or teacher's aide, such as using audiovisual material, synthetic models, software or observing the animals during educational school outings.

It is therefore possible to protect the health of both students and staff without compromising the pursuit and achievement of pedagogical objectives.

Éric Campbell
Secretary General

Sources :

- *Agence de développement de réseaux locaux de services de santé et de services sociaux Québec Montérégie*
- *Lemieux, Ryan & Associés*
- *Lombard Canada*
- *Note, Commission scolaire du Val-des-Cerfs, 19 novembre 2011*