



# Animals in Schools, Daycares, and Camps: Health and Safety Guide

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This guide is to help schools, daycares, and camps develop animal policies that reduce the risk of diseases spread by animals. It includes recommendations on which animals may be appropriate in these settings, which should be prohibited, and steps to help protect the health and safety of children and staff. These recommendations are intended as general guidance and may not address every situation.

For questions and additional support, contact the Vermont Department of Health Infectious Diseases Epidemiology Program at 802-863-7240.

Quick Reference Table	
<p>These animals <b>should not be allowed</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Wild animals (bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes, etc.)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Stray cats and dogs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Wolf-dog hybrids</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Poisonous animals (venomous/toxic)</a></li> </ul>
<p>These domestic animals <b>may be allowed</b>, at the school's discretion, and with certain health and safety rules</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Dogs and cats</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Puppies and kittens</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Ferrets</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Birds</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Reptiles and amphibians</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chickens and ducks</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Small mammals (hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, rabbits)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Fish</a></li> </ul>



## Animals Schools Should Not Allow

The Vermont Department of Health recommends that schools **do not allow** the following animals on school grounds.

### Wild Animals and Stray Domestic Animals

Don't allow wild animals or stray domestic animals in schools. This includes:

- Wild animals such as [bats](#), raccoons, skunks, foxes, and coyotes (alive or dead)
- Stray pets, such as cats and dogs, including kittens and puppies
- Wolf-dog hybrids

In Vermont, rabies is common in wildlife. Any mammal can carry rabies, a serious and fatal disease that can spread to people. Just one infected animal could expose many students and staff.

You may decide to allow a wild animal for an educational demonstration **only** if a trained wildlife professional handles it. Students and staff should not touch the animal, and the animal should stay in a secure enclosure. Don't allow high-risk animals (bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, or other wild mammalian carnivores) on school grounds under any circumstance.

### Poisonous Animals

Don't allow animals that can harm people with venom or toxins. This includes certain spiders, insects, reptiles, and amphibians.

### Bats

Don't allow bats on school grounds. Because bats have a high risk of carrying rabies, schools should not install bat houses.

## Animals Schools May Allow (At Their Discretion)

Schools can decide whether to allow the following animals. If allowed, staff should follow these safety guidelines.

### Service Animals

Service animals are allowed in schools and are not considered pets.

### Dogs and Cats

Schools may allow dogs and cats, including puppies and kittens, as occasional visitors. The owner or handler must always keep the animal under control. Before allowing a visit, make sure the animal has a calm and appropriate temperament.



**Staff and students should always wash their hands thoroughly** after any contact with the animal or its environment (like its cage, bedding, food and water dishes, toys, and droppings [poop]).

Dogs and cats must:

- Be under a veterinarian's care
- Have up-to-date rabies vaccination (provide proof to school staff)
- Be on a flea, tick, and parasite prevention program

Don't allow very young puppies or kittens unless:

- Their mother was vaccinated for rabies, and
- They have been kept indoors and away from other animals

Young animals are more likely to carry germs and parasites that can make people sick, especially young children.

## **Ferrets**

Schools may allow ferrets, but only the owner or handler should handle them. Ferrets can startle easily and may bite, so students should not hold them. Ferrets must:

- Be under a veterinarian's care
- Have proof of current rabies vaccination

## **Birds**

Schools may keep pet birds in classrooms if they follow safety steps. Always keep pet birds in a cage and don't allow them to fly freely. Some birds (like parrots, parakeets, cockatiels, and cockatoos) can carry bacteria that cause psittacosis, a disease people can get by breathing in dust from dried bird droppings. To reduce risk:

- Only bring in healthy birds
- Clean cages often and dispose of waste safely
- Consider bird species less likely to carry disease

## **Reptiles and Amphibians**

These animals may not be appropriate for schools, especially where young children are present. Reptiles (like snakes, lizards, and turtles) and amphibians (like frogs and salamanders) often carry *Salmonella* bacteria, even when they look healthy. *Salmonella* can cause diarrhea and fever, which can be severe, especially for young children, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems.

Schools should not collect or keep native turtle species or other wild reptiles and amphibians. In Vermont, many reptile and amphibian species are protected or restricted and may not legally be kept without permits. If allowed:

- Don't let children, pregnant people, or anyone with infants at home handle them
- Keep them in secure enclosures (like glass or plastic tanks)
- Wash hands thoroughly after any contact with the animal or its habitat

## **Turtles**

Schools should consider whether turtles are appropriate classroom pets. Only a limited number of turtle species are allowed as pets in Vermont, and turtles can live for decades, often requiring long-term care beyond the time a student or teacher remains at a school. If allowed, turtles **must be four inches or longer** at sale, per federal regulation.

### **Chickens and Ducks**

Chickens, ducks, and other poultry, including young animals, can also spread *Salmonella* and other germs, even when they appear healthy. Many outbreaks have been linked to contact with these animals. They may not be appropriate for schools, especially with young children. If allowed:

- Don't let children, pregnant people, or anyone with infants at home handle them
- Wash hands thoroughly after any contact
- Keep animals and their equipment outdoors and away from eating and food preparation areas
- Only adults should handle eggs and clean up after poultry

### **Small Mammals: Guinea Pigs, Hamsters, Gerbils, Rabbits**

These animals pose a lower health risk and may be allowed as classroom pets or visitors. However, remember that even gentle animals may bite or scratch when they're stressed.

- Always supervise student interactions
- Don't let animals roam freely
- Don't allow students to kiss animals
- Require handwashing after handling animals or their cages

### **Fish**

Fish are low risk and are generally safe for classrooms. When caring for fish:

- Don't dispose of tank water in sinks used for food or drinking water
- Wear gloves when cleaning tanks
- Wash hands thoroughly after cleaning

## **General Rules for Animals in Schools**

- Do not remove or collect animals (mammals, fish, reptiles, birds) from the wild for use in schools, classrooms, and camps.
- Keep animals clean and healthy. If an animal shows signs of illness, remove it from the school and have a veterinarian examine it.
- Make sure all animals receive regular veterinary care. This includes vaccines and parasite prevention, as appropriate for the species. Schools may require a health certificate from a veterinarian before allowing an animal in the classroom.
- Make sure that staff who care for animals understand the animal species' behavior and know how to care for them properly.

- Provide proper housing, food, and daily care for all animals. Plan for weekends, holidays, and school breaks so that animals are cared for at all times.
- Clean cages and tanks regularly.
  - Don't allow young children to handle or clean animal waste (such as feces, urine, or blood).
  - Closely supervise older students if they help.
  - Dispose of waste and bedding in a sealed bag or container.
  - Wash hands thoroughly after cleaning cages, tanks, or handling waste.

## Health and Safety Practices

- Make sure handwashing stations are easy to access. Staff and students should wash their hands right after touching animals or anything in their living space.
- Follow proper steps if an animal bites or scratches someone:
  - Give first aid right away
  - Notify parents or guardians
  - [Report the bite](#) to the local health officer within 24 hours
- Always keep animals away from food areas.
  - Don't allow animals where food is prepared or served
  - Don't clean cages or tanks in food prep areas
  - Don't assign food handlers to clean animal waste
- Take extra precautions for students with allergies or weakened immune systems. These students may have a higher risk of illness or reactions from animals. Work with the school nurse and the child's parents to plan appropriate safety measures.
- Consider informing parents before animals are brought into the classroom. Schools may also choose to get written permission.

## Additional Resources

- "Animals in Public Settings Compendium" and other resources at [National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians website](#) (NASPHV)
- [HealthVermont.gov/Rabies](http://HealthVermont.gov/Rabies)
- School health information and resources: [HealthVermont.gov/family/school-health](http://HealthVermont.gov/family/school-health)
- [Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife Regulations](#)

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