

Introducing a Pets topic to children

A pet is an animal we can love and care for. They come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some, like cats and dogs, are clearly domesticated and belong in the home. Others, like spiders and snakes, may seem less appropriate for a life of domesticity. But all of these animals have something in common - they appeal to young children. It is this general appeal that can be used to engage children's interest whilst providing an opportunity to explore a host of valuable educational issues.

Using pictures and word charts for stimulus, discuss the following questions:

- ☞ Who has a pet?
- ☞ What type of pet do they have?
- ☞ What do they think a pet is? (*Contrast a garden vole, an elephant or a bumble bee with a pet animal.*) Lead the children to understand that a pet is not free. We have control over pet animals and a responsibility towards them.
- ☞ Why do they have a pet? (*See box above.*)
- ☞ Are pets always small and furry? (*No. Some have feathers, scales, etc. Animals such as ponies and some dogs are quite large.*)
- ☞ What is good about their pet?
- ☞ Is their pet naughty/dirty/difficult to care for? How do they overcome such problems?

The value of a pet at home

- To provide an opportunity to cherish something.
- To provide interest and a sense of responsibility.
- To provide company.
- To provide a stimulus to find out more about other domestic and wild animals.

Gabby: an idea for presenting your topic

Make a parrot from brightly-coloured felt. Introduce the parrot to the class as Gabby, and explain that she would like to tell the children something about her early life in Africa (or perhaps another country which you may be studying for a geography project).

Suggest that Gabby was seen in a pet shop window by a friend, who felt sorry for her and bought her. The friend has lent Gabby to you.

Initially, display Gabby in a small cage. Then say that because she is very trustworthy, you are going to let her perch freely in the room. Make sure the children appreciate that you will need to feed Gabby and clear up after her.

Show the children a number of items, pictures, etc, connected with parrots and about pets in general. Say that these items are Gabby's and that she wants to share them with the class.

Explain that Gabby can communicate by whispering in your ear, and incorporate her into class discussions about pets and their needs. Some issues, such as caging animals and keeping wild caught animals as pets, will directly affect Gabby. The children can discuss ways of making her life more comfortable, e.g. by varying her diet, improving her cage, providing her with a perch outside the cage, etc.

When the children discuss whether you should keep wild animals as pets, there may be some who feel you should set Gabby free. Encourage the children to consider what problems might beset Gabby if she were to be released. Ultimately, the class may decide that Gabby should remain in the classroom but be allowed to roam at will. At the end of your topic Gabby can ask to go back to her real owner.

