

# A Practitioner's Guide to OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING ANIMAL ANTICS

**We would love to have animals at our setting, we are just not sure where to start...**

**We asked practitioners who have pets on their site just how they manage. They told us that animals can bring untold joy to many children. They can help children form relationships, communicate feelings, make sense of the world, and some children experience a calmness and sense of wellbeing that they may not have with most humans.**

Animals can become a child's **best friend**, they can create connections with children who may have additional or emotional needs and, of course, they can create a sense of belonging for a child that comes from loving and **being loved** in return. We are looking beyond the usual pet visitors today to visitors that can help us understand our planet, and the environment, whether you are in the middle of a city, or in the Scottish Highlands.



**Dalmarnock is an urban area of Glasgow**, home to [Baltic Street Adventure Playground](#). The playground started with some turtles.....and went from there.

Meet Lewis, he loves chickens, all chickens, not just Pepper (having a hug in the pic). Up until chickens became part of the Baltic St family, Lewis had never seen or held a chicken, except maybe in a supermarket, and he was able to tell staff that he had eaten chicken. Now he knows what they eat, that they like to sleep in straw and why

they scratch in the dirt. Lewis and Pepper give us a great example of the type of learning experiences we can create by introducing a wider range of animals. Oh, and Lewis also collects eggs from the chicken run, and helps to feed and water the flock.

Animals can also help with developing a sense of **responsibility**, and commitment over time, and as many animals have shorter life spans than humans this can help children experience and begin to understand **loss**, grief and death. They can create serious talking points by initiating conversations about the food chain, what animals are for food and why? (Especially on the subject of chickens and eggs!)

## Regulations

**Many practitioners worry about what the Care Inspectorate will say.** We all know that the Care Inspectorate have the enormous task of regulating our services. For some of us, the thought of getting into trouble, or getting things wrong with our inspectors can lead to children missing out on some great opportunities.



So what **do** the Care Inspectorate think about children connecting with animals in care settings?

***“For many of us, animals enhance our quality of life and bring us great joy. They help us connect in different ways and can bring comfort and nurture as well as real, tangible benefits. We feel better physically and emotionally when we spend time with pets and care for animals. I believe in the special role that animals can play, when managed appropriately, within care settings.”***

**Karen Reid, CEO, Care Inspectorate, Animal Magic**

Now we understand that the Care Inspectorate value the contribution that animals can have, we can take a look at appropriate and responsible ownership.

## Important questions to ask before you start...

**There are lots of things to consider before embarking on pet ownership at your setting.**

### **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!**

What facilities do you have (indoors/outdoors)?

Will the tank/hutch/cage be safe from passers-by?

Who will be responsible for feeding, cleaning out, purchasing supplies and veterinary care?

Are there children/staff with fears and allergies?

Who will clean up the poop?

Who will care for them at the weekends, during holidays and in the case of a pandemic!

What animals may not be appropriate? You need to think of the space you have, the level of care they need and any other risk factors.

### **Animal Magic has some great questions too:**

#### **Things to think about:**

- How could you take a partnership approach such as working with guide dogs and what would the mutual benefits be?
- Consider the benefits of having animals in your service for children who do not have pets and for children who may at first be anxious around animals.
- What might be the benefits for children in terms of building relationships and trust?
- How could having animals in a care setting help support children's learning and communication?
- How can you keep parents fully informed and involve them in planning and development of policies?
- How can engagement with animals help children learn about risks and think about how to keep safe?

## Ready? Where to start...



**Many of us have limited space** and resources so having regular visits from animal charities and trusts has been a popular way for children to come into contact with animals when it simply hasn't been possible to have permanent pets. However, in our current world of restricted visitors, and restrictions on places we can visit, perhaps now is the time to think about how we can include animals in a long-term plan.

### Low maintenance pets include:

- ✓ Stick insects (set up and regularly clean a terrarium)
- ✓ Turtles (set up and regularly clean a terrarium), remember Stink Pots do stink!
- ✓ Some tropical fish (Zebra danios, *Danio rerio*, are just about the hardiest tropical fish you'll ever keep)
- ✓ African Land Snails – This species of snail is listed as one of the top 100 invasive species in the world and it is illegal to release them or their eggs into the wild. And don't keep them together in the same tank or you'll end up with hundreds!

### Low/medium maintenance pets

- ✓ Hamsters (cages, regular cleaning food, bedding, water)
- ✓ Mice (cages, regular cleaning food, bedding, water)
- ✓ Gerbils (cages, regular cleaning food, bedding, water)

## Medium/high maintenance pets

- ✓ Guinea pigs (regular cleaning, daily feeding, an appropriate run for exercise and a hutch to shelter from the weather if outdoors)
- ✓ Snakes (set up appropriate tank, temperature and conditions and food supply – frozen mice! Remember to defrost...)
- ✓ Exotic pets and reptiles (seek help with set up, ensure cleaning, humidity and regular food)
- ✓ Poultry (freedom to roam, a hen hut to sleep and lay, regular food and cleaning out). Be aware that they peck each other – ‘hen pecked’ - and little fingers, consider beak clips for handling.

For animals that require daily care, think about shared ownership – this can work well with small pets (hamsters, Guinea pigs, mice, possibly rabbits) where 2 or 3 settings agree to share responsibility. Weekend and holiday care is more manageable as the family caring responsibilities are divided amongst more people. Sharing may be difficult during times of restricted movement so please consult up to date [Scottish Government Guidance Covid-19](#)

Most things with beaks and teeth can nip, nibble or bite. Carry out risk benefit assessments to embed safe handling practices and ways to mitigate risks.

## Expect that friends may fall out

We know that animals (and humans!) do not always get along. One of the founders of ethology, Wallace Craig (1921), claimed that animals rarely fight to kill, more often they fight to remove their presence or interference.

Commonly they fight to gain or retain something of value (food/mate/nest/territory). This makes sense and sounds a lot like the things we fall out about. Animal spats can create a great opportunity for children to observe behaviour, and to then use what they see to think about what animals need, and in the wider context, what impact **we have** when behave in a certain way.



Here's an example: Practitioners and children were recently discussing why their new ducks were not getting along. The children (and some staff) were getting worried that one duck was bullying the others.

With a little research and perhaps a quick call to a poultry expert, it turns out the ducks needed a little intervention in terms of gender dynamics to even up the group and restore a manageable form of group order. Apparently getting your duck to drake ratio right is key to duck harmony. Now the staff are more aware, the children are more aware, and we bet there are a few parents in

the East End of Glasgow who are also a bit more clued up on duck husbandry!

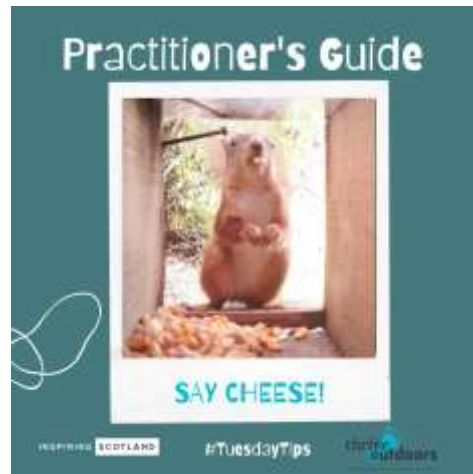
## What if we can't have pets?

**Some settings** simply make friends with the animals closest to them.

[Earthtime for All](#) operate two fully outdoor ELC settings in Elgin. They are accredited by the Forest School Association and connect children and young people with the natural environment, using creative and woodland based activities to improve self-esteem, health and well-being. They closely follow the animals that surround them on a day-to-day basis.

Their friends include some local sheep (delivered this week!) an incredible buzzard, and a cheeky squirrel who loves nothing better than posing for the squirrel cam! You can set up wildlife camera to capture the activities of animals who are a little shy, or who prefer to come out to play at night.





**We know you love a video! Check out one of our Connecting with Nature videos** <https://vimeo.com/426231839>

**Remember:** it is important that you know the needs and requirements of your pet **before** you obtain the animal. You should never, ever obtain an animal before researching its needs and preparing the housing and conditions.

Enjoy this? Share your discussions, pictures and progress with us on social media – details below

If you have top tips you would love to share, please contact us on: Facebook @ThriveOutdoorsScot, Twitter @Thrive\_Outdoors or by email [Jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:Jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk)

### Useful Links

**Care Inspectorate Hub: Animal Magic** <https://hub.careinspectorate.com/how-we-support-improvement/care-inspectorate-programmes-and-publications/animal-magic/>

**The Shieling Project**

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/theshielingproject/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/theshielingproject/about/?ref=page_internal)

**Realising the Ambition** <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/realising-the-ambition/>

**Teach Early Years: How Pets Benefit Children in Early Years**

<https://www.teachearlyyears.com/learning-and-development/view/the-nursery-tiger>