

Dear educational staff,

We have received many inquiries from parents, kindergarten teachers and school teachers who raise questions about the values taught in animal classes in the educational institution. We would like to share with you our point of view on the matter through this letter.

The bond between children and animals is often a very deep, spontaneous and powerful bond. When a dog shows fear or joy, the child easily recognizes the dog's feelings and identifies with it. When a baby pigeon falls from its nest, a sense of responsibility and a desire to help arise in the child. From a young age, the encounters between children and animals offer unrepeatable opportunities for learning, empathy and personal growth. Sometimes, however, the encounter teaches the children indifference and contempt for the other. **So, do animal classes teach healthy relationships? And what do you need to know before deciding to hold an animal class in your kindergarten or school?**

Child-animal encounters are social encounters

Studies show that children internalize the relationships they are exposed to in their environment and as the adult mediates and addresses the child's feelings and needs, the child's ability to think about the feelings of others will increase. Children examine the attitude of their parents and educators, so we must remember that by introducing animals to the kindergarten, we are introducing a model of bond and of a relationship. In animal classes, children learn a model of connection with animals that have been taken out of their natural and familiar environment, one in which the animal does not have the opportunity to realize its wants. When the child sees a rabbit passing from hand to hand or a hamster delivered in a tiny cage without the choice whether to be part of an encounter with children or abstain, the child understands that it is permissible to use another (in this case a small and helpless animal), for fulfilling his or her wishes.

A child's ability to distinguish the desires, experiences and needs of the animal present is an important element in healthy emotional development and the normal development of the child as an individual in society. A child, for example, who has learned to discern the feelings of the dog he lives with and to take into account the changing needs of his dog, will apply this blessed ability to many different interpersonal situations. In animal classes this situation cannot exist. Children are not required to put in the effort natural to a proper relationship – to check for consent. Even if you explain to children to pet or pick up gently, there is no learning of the other's will because the animal is in a position where it is helpless.

Respect and Empathy

We aim to teach children to distinguish between right and wrong, between exploitation and a mutually beneficial relationship. Gradually, we help them develop an empathic ability, to recognize and understand the feelings of others and to know that their feelings are often different from mine. **Is the encounter with an animal brought to a place unwillingly, consistent with the values we strive for?**

Animal classes do not expose children to animals as they are in the wild but to animals put on display and at the disposal of man. In encountering an animal brought in a cage to the educational framework, we undermine a fundamental developmental goal of learning the limits of using another for my own benefit. **How can a child develop the ability to distinguish between good and bad when we ask him care for other children but not for animals?** We are confused to think that a child is empathetic when he picks up a bunny and wraps it in a loving hug. When, in fact, it is possible that in this situation while the child is enjoying, satisfying his need for a hug and touch, not noticing that the bunny is frozen in fear. **The children are focused on their private pleasure, but no question regarding the other side are asked. Where did this animal come from? What does it gain from this encounter? What is the price it pays? Such an encounter is actually the opposite of what we wish for in developing empathy, because the child is not required to step into the shoes of the other party and think about what they are going through.**

In such encounters we teach conflicting messages: on the one hand, 'my body is my own' with a lot of respect for personal space, while on the other hand, in an encounter with an animal, we come and take, and simply accept a relationship in which one side has no will. The more we allow a child to use another's body, the more they will learn that it is legitimate to do this to others and it is legitimate for others to do to them.

In conclusion, we are sure that we all want to teach the children respect and sensitivity to others, but [there is nothing educational about petting a caged animal that has nowhere to go](#), there is no learning of compassion or seeing the other. In order for children to benefit from an encounter with an animal and for them to develop the ability to see the other, they need to meet animals that have the option of choosing where to be, with whom to be and what to do. The casual nature around us allows for encounters with animals in their natural habitat, without disturbing them and this is the ideal encounter. In addition, children can be introduced to animals that live on rescue farms, farms that provide them with a safe home for life. In such places, children get to see happy animals, running and playing with other animals. In recent years, such rescue farms have also been established within educational farms where children attend continuous and meaningful learning throughout the year. If you would like to have an encounter with animals within an educational institution, we suggest to have a mutual encounter, in which the animal also enjoys and benefits the relationship with the children. Such



encounters with dogs can be a model for a healthy and benevolent relationship, provided that the dog receives a full response to its needs, including the free choice of taking part in the encounter, based on a thorough acquaintance of the educator/caregiver; professional training; and, of course, ongoing veterinary care.

We hope you will see this letter as an opportunity to pause and [rethink the encounter between children and animals](#). Let us think about what the children are really learning in animal classes, let us avoid these activities and offer the children respectful encounters that will help in developing respect and sensitivity to others.

Respectfully,

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