

Health Regulation and Protection Circular

Issued by the Chief Public Health Officer

Animal education programs in childcare services and schools

Animal observation and interaction programs hosted in childcare services and schools provide a unique opportunity to learn, explore and appreciate the importance of animals in our ecological system. Having contact with animals is an experience that should be valued, respected and enjoyed.

However, animals may carry and shed germs such as *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium* and Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (STEC) in their faeces and urine. Such animals include chickens, chicks, turtles, reptiles, rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, rats, ferrets, cats and dogs.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to these infections. This is because children have immature immune systems, have an incomplete understanding of hygiene practices and developmentally may still be exploring the environment through mouthing activities.

Each year, SA Health is notified of cases of infectious illness linked to animal contact. Recently, SA Health has been notified of a number of cases of *Salmonella* infection in young children who recently came into contact with animal programs hosted in childcare services and schools.

I write to bring your attention to the [SA Health Animal Contact Guidelines](#) (the guidelines). The guidelines can be used to inform the procedures and practices of childcare services and schools to reduce health risks associated with contact with animals, and complement existing South Australian Department for Education policies relating to animals in a care or educational environment.

The recently notified cases of *Salmonella* infection in young children provide a timely reminder of the importance of several key considerations when hosting animals in childcare services and schools. These include:

Handwashing

Handwashing with soap and running water remains the key to minimising the risk of infectious disease when individuals come into contact with animals in a care or learning environment. Hands should always be washed and dried after being in an animal area, after touching animals, animal products, animal feed, animal waste, or an animal's enclosure, and before eating and drinking.



Supervision of children

Children should be fully supervised when they are in contact with animals to reduce the risk of placing contaminated fingers or hands in their mouth, putting their face close to or kissing an animal, sitting, lying or playing on animal bedding or where animals are housed, or being bitten or scratched by an animal. Children should also be prevented from bringing any toys into animal contact areas.

Parent or guardian consent

Parents or guardians should be informed of the benefits and potential risks associated with having animals in their child's care or learning environment. Any special considerations needed for children who are immunosuppressed, have allergies to animals, or who have asthma, should be identified and documented.

Animal areas

Animals should be completely separated from food preparation and eating areas. Animals should be housed in suitable enclosures restricted to a designated area.

Storage of animal feed

Animal feed must be stored in a separate container or refrigerator from those used for human food. Animal feed containers must be covered, sealed, and clearly labelled.

Animal adoption

Where animal contact programs allow for the adoption of animals, details of the adopting families and the animals should be recorded and documented.

Cleaning

All areas where animals and animal products have been present should be cleaned regularly and thoroughly using an appropriate disinfecting detergent. Upon completion of cleaning it is important for the worker to always wash hands and any exposed skin with soap and running water, and to dry hands with a single-use disposable paper towel or air dryer.

Further information

For further information on reducing the risk of illness associated with animal contact, or to download the Animal Contact Guidelines, please visit www.sahealth.sa.gov.au. Hard copies of the guidelines can also be requested using the resource order form on the SA Health website.

You are encouraged to place your orders as soon as possible as printing of the guidelines has now ceased and there are limited numbers of hard copies available.

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23 / 10 / 2019

For more information

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