

Back To School

Bird education for young children teaches significant lessons.

Science isn't everyone's favorite subject in school, but some educators are trying to make it more interesting by bringing pet and other animal literature into the classroom.

The National Aviary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which houses more than 600 birds, provides an online web curriculum (www.aviary.org/curric) for teachers, homeschoolers and the casual web visitor. The topics covered are based on four frequently asked questions from visitors of the aviary: What do they eat? How do they fly? How do they have babies? Are they related to dinosaurs?

Under each of these categories there is information, online and off-line activities, debate topics and a teacher's guide that includes suggestions of how to introduce a chapter to the class, additional background information and a rubric for assessment. "It's fun, it's playful, but it's also quite serious," said Curator of Education, Amy Padolf. The aviary's curriculum won the 2002 Significant Achievement Award from the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, and it meets the U.S. Department of Education Content Standards and Benchmarks in science, environmental education and math. The curriculum is aimed at upper elementary to middle school children.

Across the Atlantic, the Loro Parque Foundation (www.loroparque.com) in Tenerife, Spain, hosted more than 29,000 students in 2004. Programs for visitors include a guided "Macaw Expedition" tour, the video "Paco the Parrot" and, this year, a new workshop on penguins.

Some groups, such as the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), reach out to students by incorporating pets into the science curriculum. Lesson plans that emphasize a humane approach to animal care, such as, "Birds of Our Nation," are available for download by teachers at http://www.aspca.org/site/PageServer?pagename=al_resources_classroom. The lessons are designed as activities for student in grades K through 8.

More and more, pets are "being utilized in a growing number of rehabilitation and education programs nationwide," the American Pet Products Association (APPMA) found after the conclusion of its 2005-2006 National Pet Owners Survey. The survey also found that pet owners are more likely to have children under 18 years old at home when compared with the rest of the population.

"There are significant emotional and psychological benefits of pet ownership for children," said Bob Vetere, COO and managing director of APPMA. "The unconditional love pets provide helps foster confidence in children, and teaching children how to care for a pet provides an opportunity to demonstrate good values, proper behavior and respect for others."