

all creatures great small

Try recreating a veterinary surgery in your play corner, suggest **Wendy Bowkett**. While patching up poor paws, children will make many new discoveries...

Develop the children's observational skills by noticing details, and discussing what they see; thickness of fur, colours, length of tails, etc.

When working in pre-school settings, I often find that inspiration for a theme or topic comes from a chance remark of a child during circle time or when greeting them on a Monday morning with the question 'What happened during your weekend?' The idea for a veterinary surgery came about when a little girl arrived at nursery with a soft toy cat wearing a bandage on one of its front legs. The child's daddy had accidentally run over their pet cat when reversing his car out of the drive. The cat was taken to the vet, had an operation and came home the following day with its leg in plaster.

The children at nursery were fascinated by the event which sparked off conversations and imaginative play activities with the small world animals throughout most of the day.

During quiet time later that morning, children suggested we make up a story about a dog running out of a garden into the road and what happened next. The sequence of events was very elaborate but resulted in the play corner becoming a 'vets'. The children thought their toy animals could be checked over to see if they were healthy, to have their vaccinations and, of course, operations – the idea was born!

Setting up surgery

Clear a corner of a room and place a few chairs against a wall for the waiting room. Nearby put a chair and table with a notebook and pencils to record appointments. A toy telephone and cash register complete the basic reception area.

If you have space, place a small screen to separate off an area to create the consultation room with an examination table, weighing scales and wipes, notepad and pencil.





Play corners are imaginative, social activities and are ideal for children to experience and explore different roles in the world of adults. They provide opportunities for children to understand the views and needs of others. There is great educational value in encouraging children to act out relationships and behaviour unrelated to their everyday lives. They can learn about people, places and occupations as well as recreate their own experiences.

This kind of imaginative experience is important to a number of children who have no pets and never had the opportunity of visiting a veterinary surgery. In this case some explanation might be necessary before opening the 'vets'. As an early years practitioner you could take on the role of the receptionist and/or vet initially to demonstrate telephone skills, writing appointments and dealing with clients or customers, as well as showing how to handle animals. Without this prompting children may just use the area for playing as they would in a home corner, office or shop. Obviously if children are familiar with vets, give them the opportunity to add their experiences and expertise.

Most children may already understand that, apart from emergencies (as in a doctor's surgery) an appointment is needed. Others may have seen first-hand that the examination table is disinfected after each pet, to prevent the spread of germs.

Can parents help?

One of our children's parents was a vet and she brought in several empty unused medicine bottles and syringes (minus needles!), bandages and tubes to add to the play corner. Some equipment had to be thought about carefully due to safety and hygiene issues. However, although this nursery was in a rural location and the 'vets' was a very popular play corner, we were aware of over-playing the idea when an operating theatre and x-ray machine were suggested!

1. First hand experience (Knowledge and understanding of the world)

- Stage a pet-of-the-day month. We had real rabbits, guinea-pigs, chipmunks and hens at our nursery, but we also borrowed soft toys to add to the menagerie. A mouse, gerbil or hamster may enjoy a couple of hours in your pre-school. Rats and guinea-pigs make good guests as do rabbits with careful handling. Include fish, birds, insects and reptiles or perhaps a quiet cat or dog could pop in for a few minutes.

- Introduce scientific concepts. It will be obvious to most children that birds cannot live in a tank filled with water while fish can. However, we need to encourage children to explore and talk about why this is so.

- Develop the children's observational skills by noticing details, spotting differences and discussing what they see: thickness of fur, colours, length of tails, shape of ears or how they move. Children will notice the smallest of details given the chance. How many claws are there on a guinea-pig's front and back feet? Why do rabbits have such powerful back legs? Do all furry animals have whiskers?

2. Taking care of pets (Personal, social and emotional development)

- An important aspect of having a veterinary surgery in your pre-school is to allow children the opportunity of learning how to look after pets, respecting their differing needs and how to care for them. It gives ample scope for children to express their ideas and feelings, and to develop strategies to cope with new situations.

- Encourage questioning. Most pets have specific diets to keep them healthy and some foods we eat may be harmful to them. How important are vaccinations and regular weight checks? Can dogs eat chocolate? Should rabbits eat lettuce? What do snakes eat?

- Emphasise caring for pets. Many cats and dogs require grooming to prevent matted fur and fur balls. What about budgerigars, hamsters, rabbits and long-haired guinea-pigs? How do our pets keep their teeth clean?

- All aspects of animal care have parallels with children's health and well-being. Give them plenty of opportunity to compare differences and similarities as well as discussing the choices children can make that pets can not.



“There is great educational value in encouraging children to act out relationships and behaviour unrelated to their everyday lives.”

WENDY BOWKETT





5. Walk The dog (Physical development)

- Provide a dog walking service at your veterinary surgery. We decided to try this because two of our local veterinary nurses used to go past nursery walking dogs most days. The children would take a soft toy dog around the nursery and garden and be timed with a stop watch. Slow walking would take at least five minutes; longer if there was someone to chat with on the way. However the fast route took less than a minute!
- Another favourite activity was pretending to be different animals. There were mice scurrying on tiptoes, cats slinking slowly near to the ground then pouncing while stick insects moved so slowly that no one noticed.
- Another aspect of the corner was learning handling techniques. Some pets required firm handling while being gentle; a difficult concept for under-5s to grasp. The children were also seen cleaning the consulting room and floors to keep germs to a minimum.

Paws for thought

VET RESOURCES TO CONSIDER...

Professional touch

■ A new education programme from veterinary charity PDSA includes a range of free interactive resources for nurseries. Visit the website to inspire your topic. pdsa.org.uk/education



The cat's pyjamas

■ Perfect for a topic on pets, *Seven New Kittens* is a charming story that supports the beliefs and culture element of the early years curriculum. booksatpress.co.uk



3. Talking and writing (Communication, language and literacy)

- Allow the children to choose a name for the surgery, written in large letters and placed in a prominent position. An open and closed sign with pictorial clues can be placed close by with opening times displayed.
- Children often hear telephone conversations at home and will begin to recognise different telephone voices and manners, and use that knowledge when, as the receptionist, they discuss appointment times with a 'client' rather than chatter as they would to their mum.
- The appointment book, vaccination cards and prescription pad will provide and encourage children to make marks as well as write letters.
- Many children will begin to recognise words related to pets if relevant magazines, leaflets and books are available for them to look at while waiting for their appointment at the surgery.
- Give children time to describe their pet's symptoms, condition and general health to develop their communication skills, encouraging the use of correct terminology for equipment and diet to expand their general vocabulary.

4. Handling money (Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy)

- A veterinary corner with a reception and waiting room will no doubt have a cash register on hand so that clients can pay for their pet's treatment. It provides an ideal opportunity for price lists to be used with pictorial reference to the coins available. Our corner provided a rabbit consultation for just 20p. How much would a dog visit cost?
- Set up your veterinary surgery to offer toys or food for sale. Ensure that price labels are clear with coin picture references attached. Ask parents to bring sealed, clean, empty animal food bags, clean grooming brushes or spare leads to help with a display of goods for sale.
- Weighing scales add another dimension, are you feeding the new puppy too much or is the old cat too thin?



6. Make a fish tank (Creative development)

- Help children to create animal puppets, masks or make observational drawings and paintings that use their own ideas or those of others.
- We made beautiful collars for our soft toys. Some of our kittens had gems attached to fabric, felt or soft foam measured to fit around each neck. A couple of children made matching leads.
- Hang fish shapes in an open box with a back drop of a blue colour wash to create fish tanks and aquariums for extremely colourful tropical fish.
- Fill clear plastic drink bottles with twigs and attach stick insects made very simply by folding and shaping thin card strips of greens and brown.