Why animals are out of the science fair, and what to test instead

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Why most school science fairs don't allow projects that test animals or bring them to the fair, and the plant projects that ask the same kind of question.

Most school science fairs keep live animals away from the fair, and projects that test animals need forms and a review committee at every level up to the international fair, so elementary projects almost always test plants instead. Plants still grow, react and change, they don't need a review, and they give real numbers: how many seeds sprout, how far a stem leans toward the light, how tall the grass gets under coloured plastic.

I built the science fair pages on Peabody with no animal projects at all, and that's enforced in code rather than promised: every project is checked against a list of words before it can be shown, and animals are on it. Here's why, and what to do when your child wants to test the family's pet.

What the rules say

There's no national rule book for elementary fairs; each district writes its own. In the ones I read on 30 October 2026:

- The Lowville elementary fair bans live animals at the fair outright.
- The UNM STEM-H Center's K–5 rules keep organisms off the display.
- The Society for Science's international rules, which most regional and state fairs follow, require forms and a review committee before any project that uses vertebrate animals starts.

Your school's sheet wins, but you'll rarely find one that says yes without paperwork.

Why the rules exist

The reasons are about the animal and about the child. An animal can't agree to be tested, can be stressed by being moved to a busy gym full of people, and can be hurt by a test a child didn't think through. And the review that older students go through takes weeks, which a family with a fair date doesn't have. Plants carry none of those problems.

What to test instead

The same curiosity usually works on a plant. If your child wants to know whether a pet prefers one thing over another, they can ask what a seed or a stem prefers:

- Do plants bend toward the window? Three spots, nine bean plants, a ruler, about twelve

days.

- How much water do bean seeds need to sprout? Four amounts of water, zip bags and paper towels, about ten days.
- Where does a puddle dry fastest: sun, shade or wind? Not alive, but outdoors and about the weather a garden lives in.

Every one has the hypothesis frame, the steps read aloud, a results table, a logbook for the days it runs, and a board plan.

When your child really wants to study an animal

Watching is different from testing. A child can keep a nature journal of birds at a feeder or the snails after rain without changing anything for the animal; that makes a lovely piece of writing, though not usually a fair project, because nothing is changed and measured. If your child's heart is set on an animal project, ask their teacher early: some schools allow observation-only projects with no handling.

Try tonight

Put three cups of soil with a bean in each on the windowsill tonight. By the time the fair letter has gone round the class, your child will have sprouts to test. Or let Pick my project choose a growing project that fits the days you have.

Questions grown-ups ask

Are insects allowed?

The rule sets I read treat living things carefully, and many elementary fairs keep all of them off the display. Ask your teacher; a plant project is the safe swap.

What about a project on a pet's food or toys?

If the pet is part of the test, it's an animal project. Test the thing without the animal instead: which kind of water bowl keeps water coolest in the sun, for example.

Can my child bring a plant to the fair?

Some rule sets keep all organisms off the display. Bring photos and the logbook, which show the growth better anyway.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up. The library has stories about animals to read instead.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/science-fair-projects-with-animals