

FARMED ANIMAL ISSUES

The lessons that follow are designed to help teachers provide accurate information about farmed animals as developmentally appropriate. Teaching students about farmed animals is one of the basics of the elementary school experience. We all learned as children that cows produce milk and say “moo” and that pigs wallow in the mud. All of these animals we refer to as farmed animals also have unique personalities. Among farmed animals, we find mothers who love, and those who form friendships, mourn, get angry or show a variety of other emotions. We need to acknowledge this as we educate children about these amazing animals. Additionally, the New York State mandate to teach about the humane treatment of animals extends to farmed animals as well.

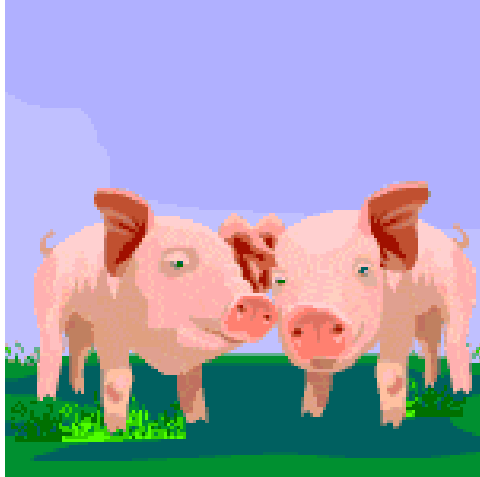
In order to teach about the humane treatment of farm animals, educators must first recognize the state of treatment for the majority of farm animals today. Since small family farms are few, the majority of farm animals are raised on premises owned by large corporations. These places are also known as intensive confinement operations or “factory farms.” This type of confinement, which usually equates to caging these animals in tight spaces, raises a host of welfare issues for the animals.



Many basic natural instincts that animals exhibit when given the opportunity, such as dust bathing for chickens and wallowing in mud for pigs, are not afforded to intensively confined animals. Additionally, there are procedures that are done to farm animals on a routine basis that would be illegal if done to a cat or dog in New York State. For example, pigs are castrated and have their tails docked without anesthesia. Baby chicks have part of their beaks seared off with a hot blade. These procedures are done in order to prevent mutilation to other animals (that would cost the company money) when animals become frustrated, due to the intensive confinement, and attack their mates.

Another issue that may arise when discussing farmed animals is their use as food. Humans have different attitudes about using animals for food. For example, as more people learn about the health benefits of eating less saturated fat, less cholesterol and more vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains, legumes and soy products, other types of diets such as the vegetarian¹ or vegan² diet are gaining popularity in American society.

Additionally, many young people are becoming aware of the unnatural realities of factory farming, and the impact it has on animals and the environment. This may induce them to eliminate or reduce the consumption of animal products in their diet. Since misunderstandings about vegetarian and vegan diets abound, it is important for teachers to understand that this can be a healthy choice for students if they are supported in their learning of new food groups.



Many resource materials on farmed animals that are available to teachers distance children from the fact that cows, pigs and chickens are living, feeling beings. This is inconsistent with any effort to foster empathy in children, which is an important element in the elementary classroom. The lessons and resource lists that follow can help you develop a unit on farmed animals that provides accurate information about them while gently reinforcing a child's compassion for animals.

At the primary level, the reality of how farmed animals are raised may be difficult for students to grasp without feeling deep despair. At this age, emphasis should be placed on demonstrating how farm animals, like all animals, have basic needs and unique qualities.

Topics to be studied by grades pre-kindergarten to three students might be infused into:

- Language Arts – Learn vocabulary to identify farmed animals and their basic needs. Differentiate between living and non-living things.
- Social Studies – Recognize that animals, like humans, have mother-infant bonds. Identify which products come from living animals.
- Science – Identify similarities between human and farmed animal needs. Observe farm animals on local farms. Recognize that human action effects farmed animals.
- Math – Compare sizes of farm animals in order to understand differences in physical space required by each animal.

Older students can examine the different attitudes that exist about using animals for food – such as the reasons why people choose to become vegetarians. The ethical, environmental and health reasons can be explored. Topics to be discussed by grades four to six students might include the following:

- Culture - How do you feel about eating cats, dogs, insects, chimpanzees? Discuss the cultural issues inherent in this topic. (For example, eating dogs and cats is quite common in some countries, though it might seem horrible to us. A person from India, where cows are considered sacred, might find it appalling that most Americans eat cows.)
- Laws - Is it legal to go home and press a piece of hot metal into your dog's flesh with no painkillers? Should it be legal? Can you think of an animal for whom this practice is not only perfectly legal, but practiced routinely every day? The answer is cows, who are "branded" for identification purposes.

Additional information can be found at:

- www.farmsanctuary.org
- www.hfa.org
- www.hsus.org
- www.nahee.org
- www.animalplace.org
- www.farmusa.org
- <http://www.envirolink.org/upc>
- www.vrg.org
- www.healthylunches.org



¹ Vegetarians do not eat any type of meat, poultry or fish. However, lacto-ovo vegetarians will eat eggs and dairy products

² Vegans do not eat any type of meat, poultry or fish, eggs or dairy products.