

# Egg hatching in schools



Egg hatching projects have been growing in popularity in schools. Despite their popularity, there are a number of reasons as to why Food for Life would not recommend that schools carry out these projects.

## The marvelous mother hen

A mother hen is one of the marvels of nature. She carefully turns each egg as much as thirty times a day, using her body, feet and beak to move the egg in order to maintain the correct temperature, moisture, ventilation, humidity, and position during the incubation period. At the same time, mum's cooing sounds soothe and calm the un-hatched chicks. Two or three days before the chicks are ready to hatch, they start peeping to let their mother and siblings know that they are ready to emerge from the shell, and to draw her attention to any discomfort they may be suffering such as cold or abnormal positioning. As soon as all the eggs are hatched, the mother and her brood go forth to eagerly eat, drink, and explore. Incubator hatchings miss out much of these lifecycle processes and focus solely on the point of hatching. This can mislead children into thinking that chicks come from machines. Supplemental facts, even if provided cannot compete with this mechanistic and decontextualised classroom experience.

## Egg hatching isn't easy

Hatching eggs is never as simple as just placing eggs in an incubator. There are a few things that can go wrong, especially when working with less-expensive incubators and without sufficient experience. Incorrectly incubated eggs can result in the embryo becoming sick and deformed as it develops. One developmental problem causes the organs of young birds to stick to the sides of the shell if the eggs aren't rotated properly. Any weak or deformed chicks that hatch will require immediate veterinary care in order to minimize unnecessary suffering. Splay Leg is a condition that causes young chicks to have one or both of their legs twist out from the hip, making it impossible for the bird to walk or even stand. Splay Leg is often caused by the use of slick surfaced materials (e.g. newspaper) in incubators, as well as incubator temperatures being too high or fluctuating.

## Hatched at the weekend

Mother nature is a fickle being and rarely performs to request. There is no guarantee as to when eggs will hatch, so the children may not even see the hatching process. Chicks could hatch out in the evening or early on a Saturday morning. Weekend hatchings can be especially dangerous, as young chicks could go without vital care or attention for the whole weekend. Deaths can and do occur as a result of care not being available to newly hatched birds.



## The classroom environment

Raising newborns will often require specialist care in a carefully controlled environment. A noisy classroom full of excited young children will not be the best place to raise young animals; especially chickens which, as prey species are highly susceptible to stress factors like noise. Whilst undeniably cute, baby chicks are also very delicate and can be injured easily. The problem with being cute is that everyone wants to stare at, hold and stroke you. This clamor for attention will increase the stress levels of young birds and can also lead to injury.

## Think of the boys

All chicks look cute when young, but will eventually grow into mature birds. Cockerels are usually very noisy and some schools may not have considered how to handle this until the inevitable complaints start coming into the switchboard. Cockerels are hard to re-home and many of these fine young boys end up being culled through no fault of their own. In addition, there are already large numbers of unwanted animals in the UK that require re-homing and unnecessary incubation projects can increase these numbers. Many unwanted cockerels from school incubation projects are clogging up 'rooster rescue' and animal rescue shelters and owners of these shelters are begging schools to please stop carrying out incubation projects.

## Hatching businesses

There are lots of companies that provide schools with incubators and eggs to hatch. As part of the arrangement, these companies offer to take back some or all of the birds once the hatching project has been completed. Unfortunately, returning unwanted birds is not always as straightforward as it may seem. Whilst some of these companies have transparent policies in place, not all are clear as to what happens to the young birds once they have been returned. Some companies may keep the hens, whilst culling all of the cockerels. Other companies may cull all birds that are returned in order to prevent potential disease transmission into their existing flocks.

## The wrong message

To some, hatching projects send out the wrong message that 'animals are commodities which are there for humans to use for educational purposes', regardless of any suffering or



unseen stress it might be causing the subjects. Furthermore, returning birds once the project has ended could send the signal that 'animals can be dispensed with as and when they are no longer required'. Rather, it is important that adults communicate the message to children that 'taking on any animal is a commitment that should last as long as the life of that animal and a responsibility that comes with a significant duty of care'.

The RSPCA opposes breeding any animals in the school environment, including the use of egg incubators:

*"It is difficult to guarantee the welfare of animals bred in the school environment and we believe that such programmes of study do not promote responsible attitudes to animal care and husbandry."*

### There are alternatives

Visit a farm – Arrange a visit to a local farm that keeps hens, observe the chicks and coordinate learning activities that are based around hatching and lifecycles.

Adopt some ex-caged hens - Many schools are now choosing to adopt ex-caged hens because, not only are they friendly, endearing pets, but they are also a great way to learn about animals and the responsibilities that are involved with caring for them.

<http://www.bhwt.org.uk/rehome-some-hens/re-homing-hens-schools/>

Search YouTube – There are lots of online videos, such as the one below, that detail the incubation process. These are much more detailed than a hatching project can ever be.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PedajVADLGw>

The internet is your friend – As with the videos, there are lots of resources online, that just require a quick internet search.

Plastic egg kits– This set of 21 plastic eggs and accompanying resources is made by Learning Resources. They detail the entire incubation period without the need for real fertilized eggs.

<https://www.learningresources.co.uk/product/chick+life+cycle+exploration+set.do?sortBy=ourPicks&refType=&from=Search&eclList=6&ecCategory=>