

Food for Life case study:

Keeping Chickens in School



Marden Vale Academy, Wiltshire

What made you decide to start keeping chickens in school?

The Curriculum within the Nurture Room is highly creative and practical to allow children to succeed; develop and build confidence, resilience and self esteem; learn life skills and to grow not just academically but socially and emotionally too. We have created a creative curriculum (cross curricular projects) as well as our LOTC- outdoor learning curriculum, which teaches children skills that are transferrable throughout their home/school life. We took an abandoned area outside our classroom and converted this into a farm. The children were part of the whole process from planning, designing; fundraising; building and now caring for the animals on a daily basis. We all decided on chickens because we wanted to teach the children not only how to care for these super intelligent farm animals but for children to understand where food comes from.

Tell us about the design of your chicken run

Our chicken run serves a vital purpose. That being protection from natural predators. During school time, the chickens roam and graze freely about the farm – often spending time in the goat pen; cuddled up to our two goats. At end of the school day, the chicken's are rounded up by the children and placed in their run. This run is designed to ensure that the chickens don't get attacked by foxes when the school grounds are quiet. Once it is dark, the chickens put themselves to bed and it is part of our school caretaker's end of day duties to shut the coop and ensure they are locked away for the night.

How do you and the children organise the everyday care of your birds?

Every morning, for the first half hour of the Nurture Room's Provision (9.00am to 9.30am), the children have 'Roles and Responsibilities'. Some jobs involve duties on the farm; others involve duties in class - such as prepping breakfast; making porridge, etc. On the farm, it is the children's task to care for all the animals. One of the jobs is to care for the chickens. This role involves:

1. Opening the chicken coop – checking for eggs to sell to staff and parents.
2. Opening the chicken run and allowing the chickens to roam free on the farm.
3. Scattering corn over the farm so the chickens can explore and search for treats.
4. Changing the chicken's water so they have fresh water daily.
5. At ends of day, it is a child's role to round them up and lock them in the run.
6. The chickens are fed Layers pellets.

Food for Life case study:

Keeping Chickens in School



Who looks after your chickens during the school holidays?

Nurture staff are very committed to our outdoor learning zone and fortunately, we share the responsibilities of covering the farm during all holidays (Voluntary). Other teaching staff have volunteered on the odd occasion. At present, we are putting together a farm committee which will hopefully bring together the whole school community (staff, children, parents) to help on the farm when needed.

What do you do if one of your birds gets ill?

So far we have been extremely lucky. All our animals, chickens included, are very well cared for and so they are in good health. We are registered with our local vet and she is very helpful whenever we ring for advice. The farm is run on fundraising and donations from the local community only – all food costs, care, bedding and vets bills are paid for by the continuous fundraising events from the staff and children. We have also allocated an amount in our account to cover the cost of vet bills.

What do you do with all of those fresh eggs that are produced?

Two eggs are given weekly to our ferrets as a treat. All the rest of the eggs are sold and the money is fed back into the farm. It is very important that the children are involved in this process so that they not only see where eggs come from but from the sale of them, they see that the money raised helps support their living costs.

How do you link keeping chickens to learning in the classroom?

Obviously, the chickens are used for learning outside the classroom roles and responsibilities. The development of social skills and emotional literacy linked to the Boxall Profile. In the classroom, we have used the chickens to innovate the 'How to Train your Dragon' Story – to 'How to train your Chickens'. This proved to be a successful and inspirational to the children. We have researched our chickens in detail and from that research/ note taking, the children have written their own care plan to enable us to effectively care for them. We have been shown by a local farmer 'How to trim a chicken' wing to avoid flighty behaviour' and from this, the children have used imperative verbs and time connective to write a set of instruction on how to do this.

What has been the best thing about keeping chickens in school?

We love our chickens. Not only are they very clever and learn routines very easily but they also love a cuddle and this type of animal therapy is invaluable for the children accessing this provision. The enjoyment and awe of finding an egg each morning is a truly memorable experience and I think it will be one that most children will always remember. The farm is an outdoor learning centre where memories are made; experiences are created and life skills are taught and the chickens are a huge part of our farm community. They are very special to all of us.