

Cream of the crop

More and more farms are helping to educate young children, as *Ruth Beattie* found out when she talked to some prize-winners

If your idea of a farm visit is watching animals from afar, think again. Farmers around the UK are now taking their educational role increasingly seriously and offering children an incredible range of learning experiences, sometimes with prize-winning results.

Janet Hickinbottom, national education officer for Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) and Farm and Countryside Education (FACE), explains the importance of their work.

‘There is lots of evidence that farms have a positive impact on children’s learning and that learning is often more effective when out of a classroom,’ she says.

‘Farm visits are not just about looking at animals but can be used across the curriculum for maths, literacy and art, for learning about life and living processes, where food comes from, how farmers look after the environment, linking us with nature and much more.’

The Bayer/FACE Awards recognise excellence in farms’ educational work, and picking up the overall prize – and the Farm School Partnership Award last year – was Greatworth Hall, near Banbury in Oxfordshire.

Rosie Jeffries grew up there and while still working as a teacher, she found herself wondering whether children could learn more outside than from behind a desk.

She explains, ‘I found myself hunting for glue sticks to use as units to teach measuring weight, and then returning to the farm where we were carrying out really useful weight work, such as weighing a lamb at birth.’

FOR ALL SEASONS

A few years ago, Ms Jeffries swapped the classroom for the great outdoors and set up the farm’s innovative educational programme. Central to the programme are school partnerships, though the farm also works with a childminder, runs a small Forest School for pre-schoolers, and hosts after-school clubs.

‘I’ve just been bug hunting with eight pre-schoolers armed with magnifying glasses – we didn’t find much, just a spider and a snail,’ says Ms Jeffries. ‘The children loved digging, and then we made a den with trees and blankets.’

For schools, the farm arranges visits four times a year focusing on fields, sheep or trees and the effects of the changing seasons. The aim is to help inform children about farming practices, where food comes from and how to live a healthy lifestyle, as for many children farming is an alien world.

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Off to explore at Whirlow Hall Farm Trust near Sheffield



In the focus on fields, children learn about crops such as wheat. ‘We start in the autumn with seeds being sown,’ Ms Jeffries explains. ‘We dig for worms and show how they are our friends, while other minibeasts, such as slugs, stop things growing. In the winter we notice the fields are bare, while in spring the plants begin to grow or, in the case of our oilseed rape, blossom.’

‘With the summer comes harvest time and we pick heads of wheat and look at the chaff and seeds. We link activities into the curriculum, for example exploring mathematical concepts such as comparison – a tiny grain versus the colossal grain stores – and we grind wheat into flour and enjoy hands-on cooking.’

‘Adopt a sheep’ tracks the process from mating through to lambing and includes children helping to herd sheep and shearing, plus working with wool. ‘Track a tree’ looks at the changes in a tree through the seasons and offers excellent opportunities for art work. ‘We often draw landscapes and trees and have even sculpted a budding tree in clay,’ Ms Jeffries says.

The visits provide numerous





opportunities for cross-curricular learning and the benefits can go further. 'I remember one little boy who clearly struggled in school completely thriving here,' says Ms Jeffries. 'When we asked how we know when the ground is ready to plant seeds, he knew it had to be a certain temperature – the rest of the class were really taken aback that he had all the answers.'

STORY TIME

Picking up Bayer/FACE's Inspiring Educator prize last year was Barleylands in Billericay, Essex, for its educational programme that is based on popular stories and caters for around 15,000 children annually.

'Little Red Hen Days were one of the first theme days we introduced eight years ago,' explains education officer Karen Watson. 'This story is ideal for Reception children, and as we tell it we show them wheat growing, help them grind it into flour and finally cook it as dough.'

The story of the Gingerbread Man is another favourite for hands-on learning.

The farm's education department also caters for bespoke requests,

such as a farm tour featuring the animals in Julia Donaldson's *A Squash and a Squeeze* and a BFG tour. 'We are lucky enough to have been given the giant's chair featured in the premiere of the film,' explains Ms Watson.

'Among other activities, children will wear giant ears and concentrate on farmyard sounds.'

This is another farm that caters for the very young. 'We have a toddler group which enjoys activities from tractor rides to planting veg,' says Ms Watson.

A key activity for all ages is cooking. 'I am passionate about this,' says Ms Watson. 'As a farmer's wife, I'm appalled at how little even my own generation know about how food is produced. If we know about how food is produced, eat real food and leave ready-meals on the shelves, it will help combat many of today's health problems such as diabetes and obesity.'

Her approach is clearly reaping rewards. 'A little boy who had visited us a few years ago made a return visit. He told me his family used to have Friday night as "Pizza Take-away Night", but now they have

"Barleylands Pizza Night" with pizza made from scratch using fresh local ingredients,' Ms Watson explains.

SENSORY EXPERIENCES

At Whirlow Hall Farm Trust near Sheffield, visitors can expect to see the traditional sights of farming life, but they will also find the unexpected – a sensory room.

The farm's programmes cater for around 10,000 visitors a year from settings ranging from toddler groups to mainstream primary schools. Picking up the FACE Access Award, however, was its programme of therapeutic farm-based learning for children at risk of exclusion or in referral units.

'A lot of our work is hands-on with animals, such as grooming ponies, which many children find very therapeutic, especially those who have relationship issues, as animals are non-judgemental,' explains programme leader Katie Jermain. 'We focus a lot on soft skills such as team-building and maintaining friendships.'

The farm's core programme takes a sensory approach to the school curriculum. On an Earth-walk, for example, children might be blindfolded and taken to a tree to hug, smell and feel it, and then try to find it again when they can see.

'Smelly cocktails', where the aim is to concoct a pungent or fragrant cocktail of leaves, twigs and more, is another highlight of the walk. 'Eye in the sky' involves children walking while looking down at small mirrors attached to their noses.

'Someone else guides them as they see the sky and trees above going past, getting a sense of what it feels like to be a bird,' explains Ms Jermain. 'Not only is this a trust-building exercise, but it also helps them empathise with nature.'

One of the most popular theme days for young visitors is based on the story *Farmer Duck* by Martin Waddell. 'We set up a classroom as a bedroom where lazy Farmer Duck is asleep. Just like the duck in the story,' says Ms Jermain.

'The children pretend to wash the dishes, get breakfast, make the bed, dig potatoes and saw wood. They also tend to the sheep and milk our pretend cow before they all jiggle the farmer out of bed, chase him through the yard and throw him over the wall! It's great fun.' ■

Feeding the sheep, cooking and watering plants at Barleylands; and close to nature at Whirlow (top left)



MORE INFORMATION

- www.greatworthhall.com
- www.barleylands.co.uk
- www.whirlowhallfarm.org
- For information about other farms and the Facetime A Farmer project, contact LEAF/FACE at enquiries@face-online.org.uk
- LEAF Open Farm Schooldays, <https://farmsunday.org/schools>
- Resources and places to visit, www.countrysideclassroom.org.uk