

BEYOND THE FARM GATE

Farms For City Children is a charity which takes urban children out of the city and onto a farm to give them a week of 'muck and magic'. **Charlotte Cunningham** visits one farm in Devon.

City kids' farm stays aid food knowledge

Getting the public to make the link between farm and fork is one of the most difficult challenges the industry faces.

It is particularly problematic in urban areas, where many people do not have the opportunity to come into contact with agriculture.

Helping the younger generation bridge this gap is the charity Farms For City Children. Founded by the author Michael Morpurgo and his wife Clare in 1976, the charity has three farms in Devon, Gloucestershire and Pembrokeshire.

These have been providing an environment for inner city children to develop their knowledge of agriculture and food production, as well as benefiting their personal development, for more than 40 years.

For those who have grown up in a

rural environment, being surrounded by open space, clean air, fields and livestock is something often taken for granted. But for many inner city children, visiting these farms is the first opportunity they have to escape some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Working on-farm

Children spend a full week living and working on-farm, giving them the chance to be fully immersed in a completely new environment.

As much as possible, they follow a true farm schedule, with the first job of the day starting at 7.30am.

Whether it is grooming horses, moving fences or feeding cattle and sheep, children get fully involved with the day-to-day running of the farm, giving them the opportunity to get up close and personal with livestock they

may have never come across before.

Nethercott House, farmed in partnership with brothers Graham and David Ward, is situated on the picturesque edge of Dartmoor.

Located close to the village of Iddeleigh, the 202-hectare (500-acre) holding welcomes about 1,000 school children every year.

Nethercott is the birthplace of Farms For City Children, as Clare Morpurgo spent much of her childhood roaming the area and wanted all children to benefit from the same experience.

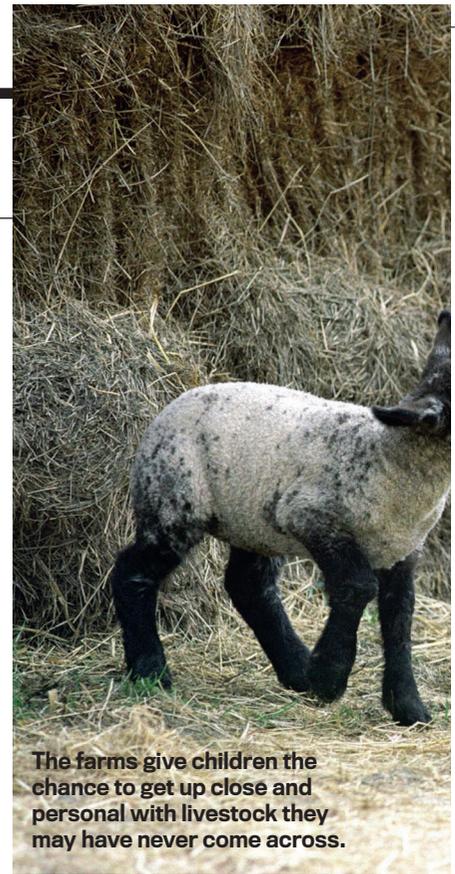
Graham manages the 160-cow herd of organic Friesians, while David runs the beef and sheep enterprises. Alongside this, the farm has a herd of Large Black pigs, horses, donkeys and a wide range of poultry, meaning children get to enjoy and work with a full spectrum of animals.

Catherine Knight has been the farm school manager at Nethercott for the past 12 years and says promoting farming and food production is one of the core aims of the charity.

She says: "It is our responsibility to showcase the best of what there is in terms of food. Children need to be thinking about what they are eating and one day will be buying."

When it comes to explaining the practicalities and realities of farming, nothing is brushed over. The farm staff fully explain everything from mating to slaughter and the final product which ends up on plates.

Catherine says: "I have a real disdain for treading lightly around



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issues, when time and time again we have seen children take on the information naturally. It is essential to teach children to be comfortable with the context surrounding food production."

This concept is reinforced during mealtimes at Nethercott House. Children get involved with cookery and everything on the menu is either grown at Nethercott or sourced locally. Pork and beef is from the farm's own stock, eggs are provided by the chickens, and vegetables are grown in the walled garden.

Animals

Catherine says: "Here, we really hammer home the idea that animals are on the farm for us to eat."

"Depending on where they come from, some children can be quite hesitant towards the food options, as culturally it is quite different to what they are used to."

"We ensure everything on the menu is child friendly, without compromising on nutrition or quality."

"We endeavour to put children in a position to be able to make informed decisions about food and hope they go home and talk about this."

As well as the wealth of knowledge children take away, the farm environment is a useful tool for personal development.

Taking part in farm tasks encourages children to work together and use new skills, and has proven to increase self-esteem, social connections and even help them conquer fears.

Catherine says: "You can see a real difference in children from when they arrive to when they leave. They look healthier and happier from being outside and their confidence levels increase noticeably. Children learn most effectively by doing something. You cannot teach teamwork as effectively in a classroom."



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CATHERINE KNIGHT