

Classroom Chicks

This Issue: Classroom “Baby Chick” Hatching

The Argument

Hatching chicks in a classroom is always unethical. Similar to buying puppies from a breeder, it is unethical to breed an animal into existence, even if that animal will be cared for properly, while there are animals already in the world who need proper homes. Chicks are taken away from their mothers before they are even born. Once they hatch they have a significantly lower chance of survival than if they were to remain with their mother. And teachers and schools rarely think of an “after” plan for their chicks once they hatch. So, most likely, chickens end up abandoned in the outdoors, abandoned at ill equipped animal shelters, or returned to the breeding facility where they are euthanized.

The Other Side

“I’m going to introduce them to my backyard flock after they hatch.”

Many teachers who have classroom hatching projects have flocks at home that they exploit for eggs or kill for their flesh. If this is the case, then taking the baby chicks home only to be exploited or killed is no consolation. You can then explain to them the issues with backyard eggs ([click here to see our backyard eggs section](#)). If the teacher claims that the chickens will not be exploited for eggs and will just live their lives as companion animals - that is likely mostly untrue - but then ask them why they don’t just adopt a chicken from a sanctuary and introduce them to their flock that way.

Usually the conversation will end up at “I want baby chicks for my flock,” or “I want to provide a learning opportunity for my students.” These are all human centered reasons for bringing a live animal into this world. When dealing with bringing an animal into the world, the primary motive should always be with the best interest of the animals first.

"I am going to send them home with my students after they hatch"

Do the students know how to care for the chicks properly? Have you vetted their home to make sure they have proper, predator proof enclosures? Have you made sure your students' parents have the time, energy, resources and knowledge it takes to keep baby chicks alive and to care for chickens for 5-7 years? If not, then the chicks will most likely die or be abandoned in the outdoors or in shelters.

The Facts

Imagine this, a sperm and egg are fertilized in a petri dish creating a fetus. The fetus is placed in an artificial womb for 9 months. Medical students come by and watch the baby grow. They learn a lot about the development of humans in utero, not anything that hadn't already been discovered and was readily available in their textbooks and research papers. But it was a very cool and interactive experiment that they can look back fondly on. Once the baby comes to full term, they place it in an adoption facility and the baby grows up in foster care. They were never held by a mother, never talked to or sang to in the womb, they never received the love and care needed from a mother at birth.

That is the human equivalent of classroom chick hatching experiments.

Human Health Risks

Because of intensive breeding and egg laying facilities, chicks can be born with the salmonella disease while seeming perfectly healthy. Students who touch and cuddle the newly hatched chicks can catch this disease which is highly infectious to humans.^{**1**}

Chicks Need Their Mothers. Even Before Birth.

Like human babies, chicks are meant to be with their mothers. Chickens talk to their babies while they are in the eggs, teaching them to recognize their voice in a flock. Mother hens will communicate with her chicks inside the shell, beginning to teach them how to vocalize their over 30 distinguishable calls.^{**1**} Chicks will even peep back to her from inside the egg! When you separate mother from baby, you destroy this important part of chick development. ^{**4**}

Mother hens carefully rotate the eggs up to 30 times per day to regulate proper temperature, moisture, and positioning conditions. Eggs kept in an incubator can be born deformed. Chicks organs can become stuck to the side of the egg shell if they are not rotated properly.

During the Incubation

There are a number of things that can **go wrong** during the incubation process:

1. Chicks must be kept at exactly 99.5 degrees F. Even a one degree change in temperature for a couple hours will kill the embryo. 5
2. Chicks may hatch on a weekend when no one is there to care for them.
3. Eggs are porous, so improper air flow can suffocate the chicks leading to stillbirths.1
4. Chicks can develop deformities if not attended to with as much dedication as a mother hen. This includes turning each egg up to 30 times per day. 5

After the Hatching²

Taking the chicks home as companion animals is usually not an option for most students or teachers. Chicks and ducklings are illegal to have in most suburban and urban areas. They require expensive and elaborate housing, proper nutrition, and are not seen by most veterinarians. Chickens or ducks raised by humans with no prior experience or knowledge as to how to care for them, live short lives. After the chick hatching experiment, there are a few possibilities to happen to the existing chicks.

1. They are abandoned outdoors, usually at the pond or lake at a park 3
 1. This poses a major threat to the chicks survival as the feathers baby chicks have are not yet waterproof. The feathers become heavy and saturated with water and they can even drown.
 2. Baby ducks or chickens are easy targets for predators and will usually not survive their first 24 hours outdoors.
2. They are abandoned at shelters. 2
 1. There is a homeless animal epidemic and most shelters are already inundated and overcrowded with dogs and cats.
 2. No-kill shelters will most likely turn the animals away on site, while kill shelters accept all animals to prevent them from being abandoned, but will most likely euthanize them.
3. They are given “free to a good home”3
 1. Realistically, these animal will not end up at good homes and are either brought home by hopeful but unprepared teenagers, or fall into the hands of people with more nefarious intent to be used as bait animals or to be tortured.
4. They are given back to the commercial poultry supplier.2

1. When this happens, chicks are almost immediately killed to prevent possible contamination of the flock.

The Alternatives^{1, 2}

Thankfully, there is exactly zero need to have chick hatching experiments in your classroom. We know exactly how chicks develop at each embryonic stage and that information is readily available, for free, anywhere from books to videos, to documentaries, to hands-on learning tools.

- Build an entire lesson plan around Herman the Duck using TeachKind resources- <https://www.peta.org/teachkind/lesson-plans-activities/rescue-story-reading-comprehension-june-2019/>
- Cornell bird lab has live cams where you can watch a Red Tail Hawk hatch- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz_a7szNlfs
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- A Home for Henny. A children's book about a 3rd grader who adopts a chicken after a school hatching project, and the trials and tribulations that come with it. https://www.upc-online.org/merchandise/humane_child.html
- Video showing video of day-by-day embryo development- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW3Tw5qpfZQ>

The Lingo

Incubation: This is the stage that happens in the classroom. Chickens' eggs are placed in an incubation chamber for on average 21 days at 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit. This process would be done by the mother hen in nature, but is replaced with a machine for educational purposes.

The Resources

1. <https://www.peta.org/teachkind/humane-classroom/chick-hatching-project/>
2. <https://www.peta.org/teachkind/humane-classroom/whats-wrong-with-hatching-projects/>
3. <https://www.peacehumane.org/2020/08/17/humane-chick-hatching-in-classrooms/>
4. <https://www.thehappychickencoop.com/20-surprising-things-you-didnt-know-about-chickens/#:~:text=Did%20you%20know%20that%20hens,mother%20before%20they%20even%20hatch.>

5. https://www.sites.ext.vt.edu/virtualfarm/poultry/poultry_naturally.html#:~:text=The%20hen's%20body%20temperature%20is,and%20roll%20it%20toward%20her.
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