

A Week That Lasted a Lifetime.

The long-term impact of residential farm visits on children

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Prepared for Farms for City Children

Executive Summary

For fifty years, **Farms for City Children (FfCC)** has enabled children from urban and disadvantaged communities to spend a week living and working on real farms. During their stay, children care for animals, grow food, work outdoors, share communal responsibilities and experience rural life first hand.

This working paper explores the long-term influence of those experiences. Drawing on interviews with FfCC founders, staff and educators, alongside survey responses from adults who attended FfCC visits as children, the research demonstrates that the impact often extends far beyond the week itself.

Participants frequently recalled their visit in vivid detail many years later. Many described it as one of the most memorable experiences of their childhood. The findings suggest that residential farm visits strengthen children's relationships with nature, build confidence and independence, develop practical and social skills, and broaden aspirations. In some cases, participants reported that the experience influenced later decisions about education, careers, lifestyle choices and parenting.

The evidence indicates that residential farm experiences should be viewed not simply as educational enrichment activities but as potentially transformative experiences with benefits that continue throughout adulthood and across generations.

Keywords: outdoor learning, residential education, farm education, nature connection, child development, long-term impact

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades, concerns have increased about children's declining contact with nature, limited understanding of food production and reduced opportunities for meaningful outdoor experiences [1-4]. At the same time, schools face growing pressures on curriculum time and budgets, making it increasingly difficult to provide residential learning opportunities.

Research consistently demonstrates that outdoor learning can enhance engagement, wellbeing, confidence and environmental awareness [5-8]. Residential programmes add a further dimension by removing children from their everyday routines and immersing them in shared experiences that encourage responsibility, cooperation and personal growth [9].

Despite extensive evidence of immediate educational benefits, less is known about the long-term effects of residential outdoor learning. Understanding what participants remember and value decades later can provide important insights into the lasting significance of such experiences.

This working paper examines former participants' reflections on their FfCC visits and explores how those experiences may have influenced later attitudes, aspirations and life choices.

2. Farms for City Children

Farms for City Children (FfCC) was established in 1976 by Michael and Clare Morpurgo to provide opportunities for children, particularly those from urban areas, to engage directly with farming, food production and rural life.

The model is distinctive. Rather than visiting a farm for a day, children spend a residential week living on a working farm. Activities typically include:

- Feeding and caring for livestock
- Collecting eggs and handling produce
- Growing and harvesting food
- Preparing meals
- Conservation activities
- Exploring the countryside
- Working collaboratively as a group

The programme combines practical learning, outdoor education and residential living, creating experiences that differ substantially from conventional classroom-based learning.

Nearly five decades after its foundation, FfCC provides a unique opportunity to explore the lasting influence of farm-based residential education.

3. Research Approach

The study employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative interviews and survey data.

Interviews

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- Founders and former leaders
- Current and former farm managers
- Senior staff members
- Teachers and headteachers

The interviews explored the original objectives of the charity, perceptions of impact and observations of children's experiences.

Survey

An online survey was distributed to former participants who had attended FfCC visits between the late 1970s and 2015.

A total of **66 respondents** completed the survey.

Questions focused on:

- Memories of the visit
- Perceived benefits at the time
- Long-term influence on attitudes and behaviour
- Impact on career and life choices
- Views on the importance of similar opportunities for today's children

Responses were analysed thematically to identify common experiences and recurring patterns.

4. Findings

4.1. Memories That Endure

One of the most notable findings was the durability of participants' memories.

Many respondents recalled specific events, activities and experiences in remarkable detail despite attendance often having occurred many years earlier.

The visit was frequently described using highly memorable language:

“The best week of my childhood.”

“A trip of a lifetime.”

“The most magical experience I can remember.”

The strongest memories commonly involved:

- Animal care
- Witnessing births and caring for young animals
- Working outdoors in all weather
- Farm routines and responsibilities
- Shared evening activities
- Friendships and group experiences
- Exploration of unfamiliar rural environments

Importantly, memories often centred on meaningful experiences rather than formal curriculum content, suggesting that emotional engagement played a significant role in long-term recall.

4.2. Learning Beyond the Classroom

Although participants gained knowledge about farming and food production, many described broader forms of learning.

Responsibility

Children were entrusted with real tasks that had visible consequences.

Animals required feeding regardless of weather conditions or personal preferences. This responsibility was frequently identified as an important aspect of the experience.

Independence

For many participants, the residential setting represented their first time away from home.

Respondents described developing confidence through:

- Trying unfamiliar activities
- Solving practical problems
- Managing daily routines
- Contributing to group responsibilities

Teamwork

Teachers interviewed for the study consistently highlighted improvements in cooperation and peer relationships.

Children often worked alongside classmates whom they would not normally spend time with at school. Shared challenges promoted collaboration and mutual support.

4.3. Connection with Nature and Place

A recurring theme was the role of the experience in strengthening participants' relationship with the natural environment.

Many respondents reported that the visit helped them:

- Feel comfortable outdoors
- Appreciate wildlife and landscapes
- Develop curiosity about food production
- Understand seasonal cycles and environmental processes

Several participants described the visit as their first meaningful engagement with nature.

These experiences appeared to influence later habits, including spending more time outdoors, engaging in environmental activities and introducing future generations to rural environments.

4.4. Personal Development and Wellbeing

Many former participants described benefits extending beyond education.

Several respondents reflected on the experience as a formative moment during childhood.

Interviewees highlighted:

- Increased self-confidence
- Greater resilience
- Improved communication skills
- Enhanced self-belief
- Stronger social relationships

Some participants also reported that the visit represented a positive and supportive environment during difficult periods of childhood.

For these individuals, the residential experience appears to have provided both practical learning and emotional significance.

4.5. Long-Term Impact and Influence on Life Choices

A central aim of this study was to explore whether impacts extended into adulthood.

The survey suggests that for some participants the answer is clearly yes.

Connection with Nature

Almost half of respondents referred to a lasting appreciation of nature and the outdoors.

Many linked the experience to:

- Spending time outdoors as adults.
- Prioritising nature for wellbeing.
- Encouraging outdoor activities for their own children.

Careers

A number of respondents linked the experience to later educational or professional choices.

Examples included careers in:

- Agriculture
- Veterinary science
- Veterinary nursing
- Teaching
- Outdoor education
- Environmental sectors

One participant commented:

“I’m now a full-time shepherdess. All because I went to Nethercott.”

Life Decisions

Participants reported that the experience influenced their future decisions concerning:

- Where to live.
- How to raise children.
- Volunteering and community involvement.
- Engagement with environmental activities
- Supporting outdoor learning.
- Attitudes towards food and farming

Some had subsequently moved to rural areas or sought careers that allowed greater engagement with nature.

4.6 Impact Across Generations

A particularly important finding is evidence that the impacts may be passed on to future generations.

Former participants frequently reported that their FFCC experiences shaped the opportunities they later provided for their own children.

Examples included:

- Encouraging outdoor play
- Visiting farms and countryside locations
- Participating in environmental activities
- Supporting school residential visits

- Promoting outdoor learning

Several participants had become teachers and had subsequently brought their own pupils to FfCC farms.

These findings suggest that the benefits of residential farm experiences may extend beyond the original participants to influence future generations.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings support growing evidence that residential outdoor learning delivers benefits extending beyond curriculum outcomes.

The study suggests that residential farm education contributes to:

- Nature connection
- Children's wellbeing
- Social development
- School engagement
- Life skills
- Confidence and resilience
- Food education and farming literacy
- Personal aspiration and life opportunities

At a time when educational budgets are increasingly constrained, residential visits are often considered supplementary activities. However, participants' accounts indicate that such experiences can have enduring significance and may produce benefits that far exceed their duration.

Improving equitable access to residential outdoor learning opportunities could therefore represent a valuable investment in children's long-term development.

6. Conclusion

Fifty years after the creation of Farms for City Children, former participants continue to describe their visits as defining childhood experiences.

The findings indicate that residential farm visits create memories that endure for decades and support learning that extends far beyond agricultural knowledge. Participants reported gains in confidence, responsibility, teamwork and connection with nature, while some also linked the experience to later educational, career and lifestyle decisions.

Most importantly, the study suggests that the effects of residential farm experiences do not necessarily end when children return home. For many participants, the influence continued into adulthood and, in some cases, appears to have shaped the experiences they later provided for the next generation.

The findings suggest that residential farm education is not simply an enjoyable week away from school. For some children it becomes a significant life experience [12-13] that continues shaping decisions and attitudes throughout adulthood and may even influence the next generation.

The evidence therefore supports viewing residential farm education not simply as an enjoyable school trip, but as a potentially transformative experience with long-lasting personal and social benefits.

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