

# Benefits of Having Animals in the Classroom



One of the things that truly sets the PlayGarden apart from other schools, even other outdoor preschools, is the wonderful menagerie of animals who live here, a flock of chickens and ducks, a big goose, and a trio of rabbits all make their home at our school. These animals are part of our preschool, our park, our curriculum, and a part of our community.

At the PlayGarden, we often think of there being four teachers in our space: The preschool staff, the children/social environment, the garden/physical space of the PlayGarden itself, and lastly, the animals.

Children are drawn to animals. Fundamentally, they present an intriguing sensory experience, one that is made of sound, smell, touch, sight, (and when we eat the chicken's eggs, taste). The smell of the chicken yard, the sound of the animals talking to one another, quietly clucking or loudly honking, the splash of the ducks in their pond, the feel of their feathers or fur, their leathery feet or sharp claws, the sight of the birds moving as a flock through the lawn, the animals distinctive colors - these are all captivating to our senses. We have had many students who would

happily stay with the animals the entire school day, holding, watching, talking to, or feeding them. The children have their own relationship with them and they seem to understand that the animals are intrinsically important and of value, and whole part of our community, each with their own personalities, and unique qualities.

In preschool, the animals are part of our daily curriculum. Sometimes it is as simple as feeding the bunnies, chickens, goose and ducks our veggie scraps from mealtimes, or searching the garden for a kale leaf to give the bunnies. Other times it's as enthralling as having baby chicks in an enclosure in the classroom, or bringing the bunnies out to hop around on our circle time blanket, or holding a chicken on our laps. Animal care is also part of our daily practice. Often, we use kid sized rakes to clean the barnyard, and have the children fill the duck pond with fresh water in the mornings and refill the food dishes. Every morning we search for eggs.

Children with vastly different temperaments and attention spans are drawn into the experience of holding, feeding, or observing the animals. Our kids are natural observers,



and track the changes and growth that the baby chicks go through over a few days, weeks, or months. When they see this development, it becomes a mirror to their own change/development, and we teachers can help them connect to this idea through conversation. Remember how little those chicks were when we first got them? They could only peep and liked to huddle together. Now look at how big they are! They can hop up on the log, and roost up high. Their feathers are changing. They can fly now! Do you remember when you were so little that you couldn't hop, or could only cry when you needed help? What can you do now that you couldn't do when you were a baby? We're all growing so much!

As teachers, we work to reinforce the natural empathy children feel towards our animals, by exploring how to best care for them, and respond to their needs. Our job is to teach our students how to hold them properly, feed them what is healthy for them, clean their enclosures, read their cues, and respond appropriately, and protect them from harm. We work on the assumption that each animal deserves respect and care, and that their behaviors have meaning, even an unpleasant behavior, like biting.

For instance, the big goose, Hop, can be intimidating for some of our students. He occasionally bites our fingers if we get too close, because (as we explain to the children), his job is to protect his flock, and biting is how he keeps us from getting too close, it's not because he's a "mean" or "grumpy" goose. We empathize with the feeling of being scared or worried he will bite, and of course teach ways to be cautious

and protect our hands, but we try and frame it as Hop doing his job, and not that he is "bad."

When children are able to be present with animals in this way, as observers, and as caregivers, they naturally build both insight into what we all need to thrive as living beings (food, water, shelter, companionship/love) and empathy for the animals as independent beings with their own experiences and needs; while at the same time, organically developing their own internal identity as someone who is a caregiver, nurturer, and helper, and who is separate in their own identity, but in relationship with others.

