

Classroom Hatching Projects

An Overview of the Ethical and Practical Problems

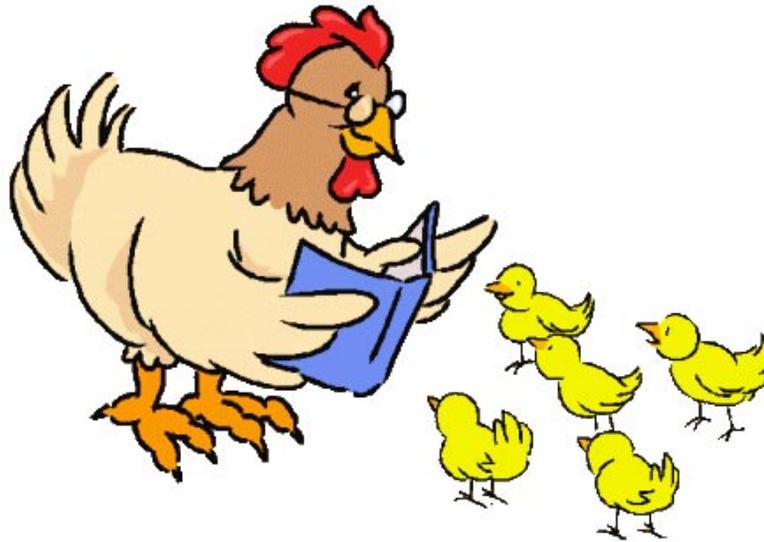


Illustration by Gregg Schindler

The Problem

The Needs of Developing Birds Are Not Likely To Be Met

Every year, kindergarten and elementary school teachers and their students place thousands of fertilized eggs in classroom incubators to be hatched within three or four weeks. These birds are not only deprived of a mother; many grow sick and deformed because their exacting needs are not met during incubation and after hatching. Body organs stick to the sides of the shells because they are not rotated properly. Birds are born with their intestines outside their bodies. Eggs can hatch on weekends when no one is in school. The heat may be turned off for the weekend causing the embryos to become crippled or die in the shell. Commercial suppliers' eggs hatch an abnormally high number of deformed birds reflecting the limited gene pool from which they derive. Some teachers even remove an egg from the incubator every other day and open it up to look at the embryo in various stages of development, adding the killing of innocent life to the child's education.



A dismal beginning for a baby bird. Where are the parents? Where is the natural world?

When the project is over, the birds may be left in boxes in the main office for hours without food, water, or adequate ventilation waiting to be collected for disposal. Schools do not normally budget for veterinary care and treatment of birds or any animals used in the classroom. That this lesson sinks into the minds of students is shown by the fact that so many adults simply "get rid of" a sick, injured, or crippled "pet" rather than pay for veterinary care.

Good Homes Are Hard to Find

Because a child bonds naturally with infant animals, students and even some teachers are misled to believe that the surviving birds are going to live out their lives happily on a farm, when in reality, most of them are going to be killed immediately, sold to live poultry markets and auctions, fed to captive zoo animals, or left to die slowly of hunger and thirst as a result of ignorance and neglect. Commercial egg suppliers send returned hatching-project birds to slaughter or simply trash them. Baby quails may be used for hunting and hunting-dog practice or recycled into repetitive "nutrition deprivation" experiments. As one egg supply farm explained, "We don't tell the school and kids the truth because they become emotionally involved. The emotional involvement of people goes beyond our counseling capacity."

Some children do learn the truth. At a special education school in New York City, for example, the custodian flushed deformed live chicks down the toilet, while at another special education school, the teacher twisted the deformed chicks' necks and then flushed them--significant lessons for children who are themselves disabled.

School hatching projects increase the number of animals no one is asking for – millions of living creatures, including classroom chickens and other birds, whom we pay people to "euthanize" each year or whom a parent may reluctantly take on, usually temporarily. School hatching projects encourage students to desire to repeat the classroom experience by producing unwanted litters of puppies and kittens. After all, aren't we assured that a "farm" or a "shelter" will absorb our castoffs?

Each year, animal shelters across the country are confronted with unwanted chicks, ducklings, quails, even turkeys and ostriches, many of them ill, from educators who never thought of the fate of the birds, or could not find homes for them, or could not perceive their illness, adding to the tremendous burden already borne by the shelters. Surely there are enough animals who need homes already without adding to the population and perpetuating the behavior responsible for the problem.

Most communities ban domestic fowl, but even those that permit keeping chickens usually allow only a few hens but no roosters, yet half of all chick hatchlings are roosters. Even people who can provide a good home can accommodate only so many male birds. Normal flocks have several females to one male. Roosters crow before dawn and during the day. Crowing is part of the complex communication system that evolved in the chickens' jungle habitat, yet it is complained about in most neighborhoods as a nuisance – adding to the tragedy of millions of unwanted roosters with no place to go.



Photo of swimming Pekin ducks by Gary Kaplan

The Lessons of Nature Never Taught

The lesson never taught is that chickens, ducks, quails and other ground-nesting birds are marvels of nature. They are energetic foragers with excellent eyesight, strong legs and other features that enable them to find their own plants, seeds, and insects with expertise. Japanese quails mate for life and have strong migratory instincts that are totally frustrated in captivity. Ducks need water not only to drink and swim in, but to ensure the health of their eyes with constant rinsing. Chickens and turkeys have an inborn need to range and be social. Ostriches and emus have a strong family life in which both parents play an active role in the nesting, incubation, protection and teaching of their young.

A mother hen turns each of her eggs carefully as often as 30 times a day, using her body, her feet, and her beak to move the egg precisely in order to maintain the proper temperature, moisture, ventilation, humidity, and position of each egg during the 3-week incubation period. Embryonic chicks, ducklings, quails, turkeys, pheasants, ostriches and emus respond to soothing sounds from the mother hen. Chicken embryos respond to warning cries of the rooster. Two to three days before the baby birds are ready to hatch, they start peeping to notify their mother and siblings that they are ready to emerge from their shells, and to draw her attention to any distress they are experiencing, such as cold or abnormal positioning. A communication network is established among the baby birds, and between the baby birds and their mother, who must stay calm while all the peeping, sawing, and breaking of eggs goes on underneath her. As soon as all the eggs are hatched, the hungry mother and her brood go forth eagerly to eat, drink, and explore.

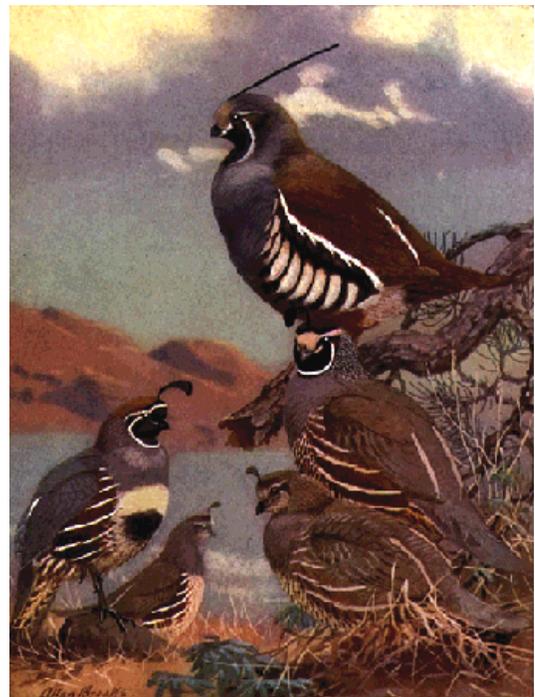


“The Hatchlings.”
by [John Seerey-Lester](#)



**Photo of a rooster watching over his hen and their chicks in the Florida Everglades.
By Davida G. Breier**

Instead of teaching these valuable lessons, school hatching projects mislead children to think that artificially incubated birds come from machines with no need of a parent or a family life. They do not perceive the parents' role in nest-making, incubation, protection, care, and teaching of their young. Supplemental facts, even if provided, cannot compete with this barren, mechanistic, and decontextualized classroom experience which gets passed on from one generation to the next. For example, a teacher whose students hatched an ostrich in class mistakenly told the newspaper that the only thing baby ostriches learn from their parents is "the pecking process."



**Quail family painting
courtesy of United Poultry Concerns**

Meaningful, Humane, Creative Replacements Are Needed



Bird watching is a great way to learn about birds without disrupting their lives.

School hatching projects teach children (and teachers) that bringing a life into the world is not a grave and permanent responsibility with ultimate consequences for the life created. Elimination of this idea from our schools is a practical extension of the socially responsible atmosphere we strive to create for our children, including respect for the family life of all creatures. Hatching projects need to be replaced with creative programs including colorful books, filmstrips, videos, computer programs, and plastic models that demonstrate the embryonic process in the major stages of development of a bird inside an egg. Programs already in use in other areas of biology can be adapted to hands-on instruction based on materials that do not entail the repetitive generation of living beings for terminal procedures. Educators can help by urging educational supply companies to develop alternative programs, and by purchasing existing alternative programs, thereby creating a demand.

An understanding of the natural life of chickens, quails, pheasants and other ground-nesting birds, incorporating the fact that they *are* birds, can be encouraged by quietly observing a nest of wild birds including pigeons, sparrows and others who have adapted to urban life. Field trips to sanctuaries where ducks can be seen swimming and chickens can be seen socializing, dustbathing, sunbathing, foraging and enjoying themselves outside will help students see these birds in a sensitizing and appealing perspective. Field trips with the local Audubon Society or other nature study groups can incorporate holistic projects in which students observe the fascinating ecology of many kinds of birds.



The family of birds known as *pheasants* includes chickens, quails, peafowl, pheasants and other ground-nesting birds. Painting of male and female Golden pheasants by Barry Kent MacKay.

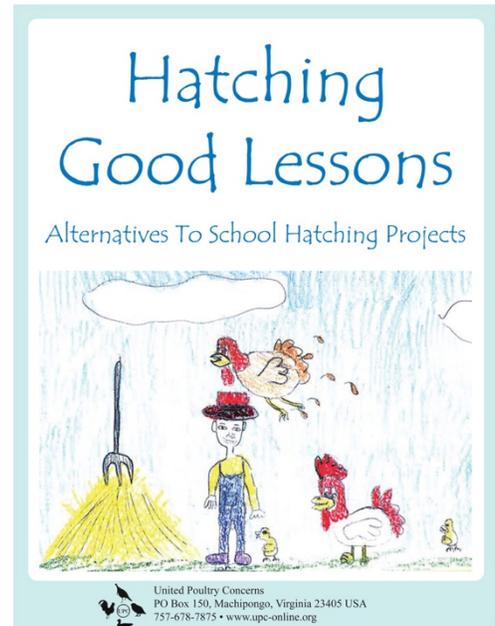
What Educators and Parents Can Do

If a hatching project is being considered at your school, please choose a different project, or urge the science curriculum coordinator or whoever is responsible to choose a replacement that respects the life, feelings, and family life of all creatures. In doing so, you are helping to build a society in which it will one day be unthinkable to generate life merely as an experiment. If young children are "excited" by bird-hatching projects and the production of litters of puppies and kittens, this is because they are innocently bonding with these baby animals without understanding the consequences. Most of the animals do not have a happy (or any) life ahead, and multiple unwanted offspring frequently result from those who do. The majority of children who learn the truth are emotionally traumatized and justifiably feel betrayed.

Alternative Classroom Resources and Activities

Hatching Good Lessons: Alternatives to School Hatching Projects is a 16-page guide booklet for teachers, parents and other educators including information, storytelling, classroom activities, physical resources and color photographs for children in grades K-6. Some of the activities are designed for K-12. The booklet is available in both [print and online versions](#).

For additional classroom resources and ideas, see [School Hatching Projects](#).



A mother turkey shelters her poults with her wings. Courtesy of United Poultry Concerns.