



FOOD CHAIN FACTFILE

Concrete children

New research suggests a generation of “concrete children” are growing up in England, with an estimated 1.1 million pupils never visiting the countryside¹. These children are likely to have extremely poor levels of agricultural literacy – in other words, a very limited understanding of how the food chain works.

- One in five children in England between 8—13 never visit the countryside; whereas only one in ten say they never go abroad on holiday
- One in four children across England have never visited a farmer’s market or shop
- A fifth of children have never picked fruit and eaten it
- A quarter of 8-9 year olds are yet to have come within touching distance of farm animals like cows or pigs

Whilst children are missing out on rural opportunities, they’re making up the time in other ways.

- English children aged 11-15 now spend 55% of their waking lives watching TV and computers. This equates to 53 hours spent in front of a screen a week - a rise of 40% in a decade²

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all the following information has been sourced by the research study commissioned by the Year of Food and Farming campaign, carried out by EdComs in July 2007.

² BRMB, 2004

- 20% have never been to the countryside, but 21% of children visit virtual worlds on the internet – most days
- 19% may have never picked fruit – but only 9% have never picked up a takeaway

Why agricultural literacy matters

Research commissioned by the Year of Food and Farming illustrates that there's a very real connection between the opportunities children have to interact with the countryside, and their appreciation of the food chain.

- Two thirds of pupils with rural experiences are interested in where their food comes from – only 40% of children who never visit the countryside care where their meals started out
- Children without rural experiences are twice as likely to admit they didn't know where food like rhubarb or spinach comes from, relative to those who do visit the countryside. Many of the children studied in more depth could only suggest that their food came from shop shelves or city centres, rather than tracking back through the food chain (quotes available on request)
- Hands-on experiences don't only provide pupils with a better grasp of where food starts out, they also makes them more likely to want to eat those foods. Studies have shown that children who are given a taste of growing vegetables develop positive appetites for their produce – in some cases becoming a third more likely to ask for food like courgettes or peas

- Countryside experiences can also create positive indoors results. Children who are often exposed to the countryside are more likely to be regular helpers in the kitchen: over a third of these pupils stated they always or often help prepare the family meal, against one in five of our “concrete children”.

Green fingers lead to keen thinkers

According to a review led by Dr Aric Sigman, who designed the launch study for the Year, interaction with the countryside also does more than give children food for thought about their diets. Many research studies have shown the benefits of “green time” – simply being in the countryside, school garden or a leafy environment - are significant.

- Children with views of and contact with nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. The greener the view, the better the scores
- Exposure to natural environments improves children's cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills
- Results for schools with outdoor education programs show better performance on standardised measures of academic achievement in reading, writing, maths, science and social studies. Classroom behaviour also showed improvements³

³ Wells 2000, Taylor et al 2002; Pyle 2002; Lieberman & Hoody 1998

What next?

With all the gains to be had from reconnecting children to the countryside, the Year is urging farmers, food producers and schools to register on its MegaMap – www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk – to give pupils given hands-on, memorable learning experiences that they'll never forget.