

The Project Approach to Learning at

RisingOaks
Early Learning | St. Matthew



Project Name: On the Farm

Age Group: Toddler 18 months-2 years

Project Start Date: September 2022

Project End Date: March 2023



RisingOaks
Early Learning Ontario

Background

The RisingOaks Early Learning | St. Matthew toddler program began their Farm project in September of 2022. The project began with Brittany (RECE), Heather (RECE) and Jamie (RECE). Part way through the project Jamie left the teaching team and Eli (RECE) filled her position, finishing the project with us. The children involved in this project range in age from 17 months to 2.5 years. The project concluded March 2023.

Phase 1: Beginning the Project

In September of 2022 the educators observed the children displaying a large interest in playing with our bucket of animals. The children were observed holding various animals and making sounds they thought the animals should make. Many of the toddlers were familiar with the sounds for cats and dogs, however, they did not know many of the other animal sounds. The educators explored the children's knowledge deeper through the song Old MacDonald and discovered that the children were very interested in this topic and also that there was an opportunity to expand their knowledge. To confirm our findings, we brought out a variety of farm toys to see if the children's interest would continue. After some time observing the children in their play, the educators in the room had a team meeting where we shared our observations and made inferences about why this would be a meaningful topic to explore and what questions we thought we should investigate. We created a chart outlining what the toddlers already know, what we would like to know and who we can ask to help answer our questions. We also put together a web of different areas we would discuss and explore throughout our project.

What we know

Animals live on farms
Tractors are on farms

What we want to know

What sounds do all the animals make?
What do animals eat?
What animals live on the farm?

Who we can ask

Heather (grew up on a farm)
Local Farmers



Figure 1 Children playing with a toy farm.



Figure 2 A child playing with farm toys



Figure 3 Keri (RECE) and a child using a farm balancing toy

Phase 2: Developing the Project

Favorite animal survey

One of the first things we did with our project is a survey asking each child what their favorite animal is. We used small wooden animals as a visual to aid the children in their choice. We wrote their names under the heading of their selected animal. This allowed us to reflect throughout the project, seeing if our favorites would change or stay consistent! We found that many of the children changed their choices throughout the project as they gained more information about the different animals.



Figure 4 Tyson (2 years) picking out his favorite animal



Figure 5 A child picking their favorite farm animal

Watching farm videos on the iPad

Since we are not able to take our toddlers onto a bus for a field study, the iPad often becomes an important educational tool for us to get real life exposure to the topics we explore as a group. Throughout our farm project we used the iPad to help us observe what life is like on the farm. We watched videos of cows grazing on grass, tractors moving large bails of hay, pigs rolling in the mud and farmers feeding their animals! These videos helped the toddlers apply the learning we were doing in the classroom with our toy animals to real life examples and connect them to the world around them.

Muddy animal scrubbing

A tray of animals covered in brown paint with a small bowl of soapy water, a sponge and a toothbrush were presented to the toddlers one morning. After watching the muddy pigs on the iPad earlier in the week, the toddlers quickly caught on that the brown paint was acting as mud in this activity. The toddlers used their fine motor skills to bathe the toy animals after their 'mud baths'. They used the sponges to soak up water, then held the sponge over the animals and squeezed to release the soapy water over top of their animals. This experience provided an opportunity for the children to strengthen their grasp as well as built on their understanding of cause and effect. They manipulated the toothbrushes to scrub the animals to further clean them, strengthening their hand eye coordination and prewriting skills. As the children worked, we discussed as a group animal activity on the farm as we imagined how these animals would have got so muddy!



Figure 6 A child washing 'muddy animals'



Figure 7 Isla (19 months) washing 'muddy animals'



Figure 8 A child washing 'muddy animals'

Animal puppets

After seeing how interested the toddlers were in colouring, we thought we would spend a morning colouring and creating animal puppets! The toddlers used their developing vocabulary to pick out which animal they would like, then used crayons to colour their pictures. After, a popsicle stick was added to the back to create their puppet! We used the puppets later on as a group as we read books and sang songs about animals. During Old MacDonald, the children held their animal puppets up for their turn and demonstrated their growing knowledge as they labeled the animals and identified their correct sounds to help us sing the song! Stories and songs became a very important tool for building on the children's vocabulary.



Figure 9 Henry (2 years) colouring an animal puppet.



Figure 10 Brittany (RECE) reading Brown Bear to a group of children



Figure 11 Heather (RECE) reading a book about animals to a group of children

Animals and their babies matching game

As we continued to learn about the different animals that live on the farm, we began talking about what the animal's babies were called. We were becoming exposed to many new vocabulary words as we learned about calves, ducklings, piglets and foals. We wanted to create a hands-on learning opportunity for the toddlers to help them make sense of and retain all of these new words they were learning. Eli (RECE) created an animal match game for us to explore. With the various animals posted, the toddlers were each given turns with the pictures of the animal babies to match up with parent. As we worked, we read and repeated all the names of these animals. We were also able to observe the similarities and differences between the adult and baby animals such as changes to size and sometimes colour or shape as well.



Figure 12 Amelia (23 months) matching animals with their babies. Figure 13 Henry (2 years) matching animals with their babies

Milking a cow

First, the toddlers watched a short video on how to milk a cow. Then milk stations were set up, they were made from two chairs, with a picture of a cow's face at one end, and a rubber glove filled with water /white paint mix, on the other end. A wood stump was also made available for the toddlers to sit on as they practiced hand milking the cows. Cow sounds were also played to add to the farm experience! The toddlers developed their focus and concentration as they worked to squeeze the 'teats'(fingers of the glove) to release the "milk". This activity helped to develop their understanding of spatial concepts, as we got the milk out of the cow and into the bucket below. Educator Heather shared some of her farm experiences as the children engaged in this activity and answered any farm Inquires that came up. Afterwards, the toddlers helped name the two cows and decided on the name's "horse" and "pig". We also discussed all of the different things that are made from milk!



Figure 14 Amelia (23 months) pretending to milk a cow



Figure 15 Amelia (23 months) pretending to milk a cow



Figure 16 Isla (19 months) pretending to milk a cow

Making butter

Scaffolding on our cow milking activity, we decided to next make butter with the toddlers. As stated above, during our cow milking activity we discussed how cows give milk and what can be made from milk. Wanting to apply hands on experiences to this knowledge, we used whipping cream and a bottle to help us make our own butter! The toddlers each took turns shaking the bottle full of cream. Along with our learning we were also strengthening our shoulders and arms and developing our bilateral movement skills. We paused to observe the different stages as we worked. We observed that first the whipping cream was liquid and runny almost like milk but a bit thicker. As we shook the bottle more and more we noticed the cream getting thicker and thicker. We observed that we could not even see through the bottle anymore as the thick cream coated the sides of the bottle. The cream got so thick that it didn't feel like we were doing anything anymore as we shook it. Finally, we noticed a thump when we shook and we were starting to be able to see through the sides of the bottle again. When we were done, we were left with a large lump of butter that had become a solid, with a small amount of liquid in the bottom called buttermilk. All that hard work of shaking the bottle helped us work up an appetite! Good thing it was then snack time, we enjoyed buns with our very own homemade butter on them plus some jam, yum!



Figure 17 Isla (19 months) observing another child making butter



Figure 18 Leah (23 months) shaking a bottle of whipping cream to make butter

First and last drawing

At the beginning of our project the children completed their first drawings of a farm. They created their pictures using their existing knowledge about what a farm is which varied from child to child. Then, as our project ended, they completed a second drawing of the farm. In their second drawings we observed evidence of their learning as their color selection reflected the toy barn from our class, the beginning of shapes representing the barn and silo began to form as well. One of the children included a tractor in their second drawing. We sat as a group at the table working on our drawings where social development and conversation happened alongside our creativity. Some of the children made comments about the animals living in their farm, one of the children

drew their family there. It was evident that the toddlers had a lot more information about animals and farms to apply to their second drawings.

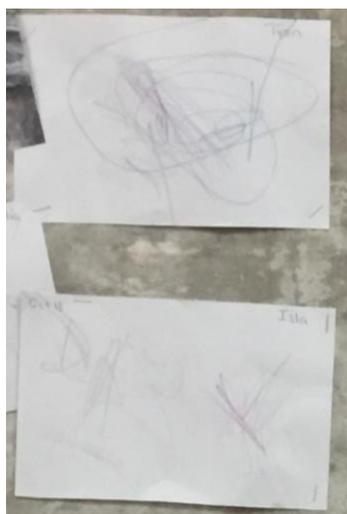


Figure 19 Tyson and Isla's first drawings

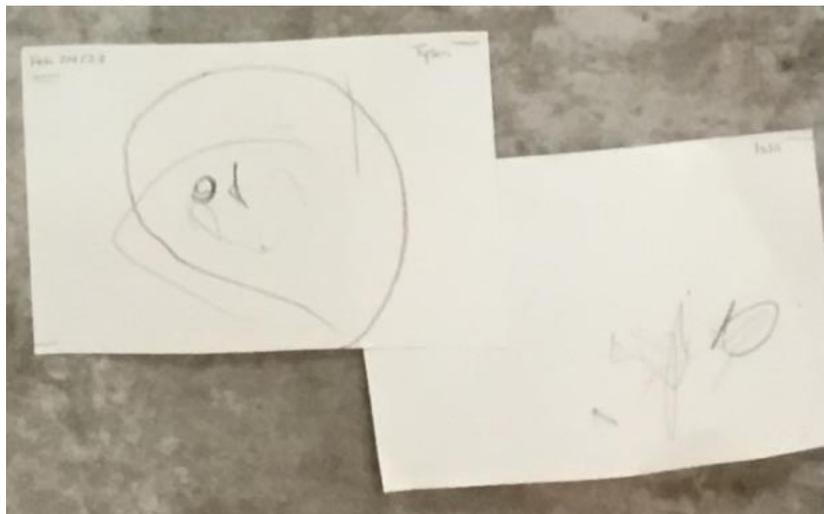


Figure 20 Tyson and Isla's second drawings

Phase 3: Concluding the Project

In February we began to notice that the children's interest in farm animals was beginning to settle down. Other interests were starting to emerge within our group and we had answered all of the questions we set out to explore. Many of the parents had commented to us on how they've noticed their child now knows all of the farm animal sounds. We have also noticed this through observations in the classroom. It seemed like our project was ending though the class had thoroughly enjoyed it, and really absorbed the information we discovered along the way!

As a final celebration to wrap up our farm project, we invited local hobby farmers to our classroom on March 8th, 2023. They brought five baby bunnies with them, three white and two dark brown. The toddlers were delighted to see the bunnies and were able to sit and pet or hold them, feeling their soft fur and observing their tall ears and fluffy tails! "bunny bum, bunny tail, right there!" Alex excitedly pointed out as he was watching. As they interacted with the bunnies, we also learned a bit about how to care for them.

The farmers showed the children how to feed the bunnies broccoli, carrots and dandelion greens. She told us that the dandelion greens were one of their favorite foods and is very nutritious for them. The children eagerly helped, watching as the bunnies nibbled on their healthy snacks. They also learned a bit about the importance of giving the bunnies fresh water and keeping their living space clean. The farmers told us that sometimes people will come to their farm to pick out a bunny to take home as a pet. To which Charlie quickly responded "I would take one home!"

The visit from the bunnies was not only fun and exciting for the children, but also helped foster their developing social skills. The children needed to take turns interacting with the bunnies and remember to remain calm, quiet and gentle despite their excitement. Before the bunnies arrived, we sat together to prepare by practicing gentle interactions using a stuffed bunny. While everyone was very excited, some of the toddlers were also a bit nervous. We supported all the toddlers through this experience by being responsive to each child's unique needs. Some were comfortable and excited to hold the bunnies and feed them, others preferred for an educator to hold the bunny while they pet and fed them and some preferred to just watch. Each child was able to participate at the level they were comfortable with, helping them to develop a healthy sense of self by setting their personal boundaries, feel a sense of belonging within our classroom. Many of the initially nervous friends were able to feel more comfortable with time and were able to give them a gentle pet to feel their fur.

In the following days after the visit from the hobby farmers and their bunnies, the toddlers continued to show their excitement and interest in the experience. We talked about bunnies throughout the day, how they were soft, how they hopped and the foods that we fed them. Theo told us "I love bunnies." Overall, it was a fantastic opportunity for the children to connect with nature, have a hands-on learning experience amongst their peers and finish our project with what we hope will be a lasting memory for everyone.



Figure 21 A child feeding a bunny a carrot



Figure 22 Amelia (2 years) holding a bunny



Figure 23 Eli (RECE) holding Leah (2 years) as she observes Amelia (2 years) interacting with a bunny



Figure 24 Tyson (2 years) holding a bunny while Heather (RECE) and two other children offer it carrots

Teacher Reflections

Over the course of this project, it was very clear to see the children's growing knowledge and expanding vocabulary. One of the most obvious ways to observe this was through their knowledge of animal names and sounds. Throughout the project we had many parents come in to comment that their child knows about so many more animals now than they did before. I think there are a lot of project topics that may not have as much new vocabulary as this project had. That combined with a big boom in a lot of the toddlers' speech development over the same time, really helped to showcase what the children were absorbing as we learned together. Having one educator with some farm life knowledge was very helpful as Heather was able to guide us to some resources and make sure we touched on all the topics we should when exploring farms.

I think the most valuable experience during this project was having the bunnies come in. While bunnies might not be the first animal you think of when thinking about farm animals, it was a way for us to bring in a hands-on experience with the children. The impact of this experience on the children was immense and was a great way to tie together everything we had learned with a memory that is sure to last.