

Petting Zoos:

An Educational Experience?

Petting zoos give children the opportunity to get close to and touch animals they might not usually encounter. All animals are fascinating and seeing an animal can be a wonderful experience. But how educational are petting zoos? It is hard to say that looking at a duck who was meant to live on a pond or wetland, but is now limited to a wire pen and a dish of water, gives children a true understanding of wildlife or how animals live in natural environments. What children really learn when they see animals in petting zoos is how frightened animals behave in captivity and that it is acceptable for them to be stressed and transported long distances simply for entertainment.

Caged animals, even traditionally domesticated animals like goats, pigs, donkeys, and sheep, suffer from boredom and disorientation. Pigs confined to small spaces and deprived of the company of other pigs can become destructive and dangerous. Separated from normal social groups and natural habitat, the stress of captivity is heightened by unusual noises, closeness to animals of other species, and the lack of shelter where animals can avoid contact with humans if they choose.

In most petting zoos children can walk right up to an enclosure and put their fingers through the wire. There is rarely enough staff to ensure that visitors do not harm the animals, or to protect the hapless bunny who is picked up and dropped by an excited child.

Besides ignoring the social and behavioral needs of animals, their physical needs are often neglected.



Shelter from wind and sun, especially during the summer months, is crucial for many species. And there are other concerns such as transportation (often in hot, stuffy trucks), overcrowding, inadequate bedding, and lack of veterinary care. Access to fresh water is often limited and the animal feed that is sometimes available from a machine, in addition to creating animals dependent on begging, is no substitute for the fresh food many animals require.

Petting zoo operators perpetually breed or purchase animals so that they will have an endless supply of "cute babies" to draw crowds. These babies are prematurely removed from their mothers, denying them the natural socialization process needed for normal development and then these frightened, helpless babies are hauled all over the place for our entertainment. Older animals are simply disposed of when they have exhausted their usefulness.

Children who visit petting zoos often bring home much more than their parents bargained for as petting zoos can infect children with potentially lethal bacteria. According to the Humane Society of the United States: "Petting zoos with wild and domestic animals on display for visitors to touch need special consideration. More than 75 zoonotic diseases can be transmitted from animals to people—many without direct physical contact—including rabies, salmonellosis, toxoplasmosis, and E. coli. Children, pregnant women, and the elderly are especially at risk. Children younger than five should be closely monitored—or even prohibited from contact with the animals. These operations should also provide hand-washing facilities that include running water, soap, and disposable towels. And neither food nor eating should be permitted near the animals or their enclosures."

So please think long and hard about the lessons your child is learning from animals in petting zoos.

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