

Happy Hatchlings: Using Living Creatures as Specimens

Sean held his five-year-old sister Phoebe's hand and led her toward the parking lot. He could tell that she was reluctant to leave the annual county fair, for as they walked, he felt Phoebe's hand tug back in the other direction. As they passed the booth owners, who were just starting to dismantle their multicolored stalls—filled with candy apples, games, and crafts-- Sean was startled as Phoebe stopped short and shrieked.

"Look! A baby bird!" she exclaimed gleefully. A baby chick—no larger than the size of Phoebe's small fist—toddled away from them, obviously unaccustomed to moving on those tiny talons. Phoebe dragged Sean after the chick, who led them behind one of the larger booths. There, a display sponsored by a junior agricultural club outlined the lifecycle of a chicken. It featured an incubator with eggs and a straw-filled box with two light bulbs hanging above for warming the newborn chicks. Sean caught up to the little bird and picked up the creature. She was so tiny, cute, and full of life as she cheeped in his hand. As he gently placed the bird down in the straw, he noticed that the grass was sprinkled with ripped, red raffle tickets. A woman was walking toward her pickup truck with a crate of what appeared to be eggs. Before Sean could stop her, Phoebe bolted toward the woman.

"What's in there?" Phoebe asked curiously.

"Eggs," the woman replied. "Leftovers that weren't raffled off during the day. And, do you know what these are going to become?" The woman paused, but found the child suddenly timid, so she went on. "Baby chicks!"

"Awww!" Phoebe said, suddenly regaining her voice as Sean reached her side. "I want a baby chicken! Can I have one?"

"Well," the woman thought for a moment. "I don't see why you can't have one of these eggs. They'll probably hatch before we make it to the next fair on Wednesday anyway."

Sean looked into his sister's eyes, which were staring back at his—searching for permission—but he wasn't too sure. He wondered why the unhatched chicks were being raffled off and why this woman was so willing to let his little sister take one. Is he just being extra cautious or does he have the right to be concerned about the chicks?



There are surely few animals cuter than baby chicks, with their soft down feathers and adorable waddle. But despite Phoebe's obvious and understandable excitement, Sean is right to be concerned. This might be a good time to ask the woman representing the junior agricultural club some questions about her display and why she is giving away her unhatched chicks.

The MSPCA believes that all animals, including farm animals, should be treated humanely; that is, free of unnecessary pain, suffering and stress. The MSPCA sees many unwanted chicks, mice, rats, and frogs surrendered each year as a result of school and agricultural lessons. Additionally, animals should never be given as prizes or gifts, and guardianship should be discussed thoroughly with all members of the family involved with pet care and interaction. When animals are obtained on impulse, many are ultimately given away, neglected, abandoned, or euthanized.

Projects and experiments using baby chicks and other small animals have been prevalent in schools and agricultural clubs for many years. Even though the lessons learned may have some value, there is often more harm done than good. For example, baby birds raised for chicken life cycle lessons are deprived of their mother hens and are often less healthy than naturally-raised chicks. These fragile animals are often mishandled resulting in pain, maiming, and even death to the chicks. And when the projects are over, the animals need to find proper placement in homes geared to care for them. Almost universally, the number of homes available is less than the number of animals, resulting in the surrender of animals at a shelter or even euthanasia.

Sean might want to take Phoebe aside and explain to her why they can't get a chick today. It just doesn't make good sense to get a pet without the permission of their parents. Also, it would be unfair and even traumatic to both the chick and Phoebe to have to later return the little bird to the fair or an animal shelter. The best bet is to think through the idea with their parents.

Approaching the woman at the fair with some questions is a great idea if she has time to talk with them. If so, Sean can ask if the life cycle display needs live chicks or if it can be made more humane by using diagrams, models, and interactive videos. Also, Sean knows the baby birds born for the use at each fair must add up in number. He can ask what happens to the chicks after the fair. If they are given away or raffled off, how does the woman know if they are going to responsible homes set up to care for chickens? Most people don't know much about taking care of farm animals.

When he returns home, Sean might discuss this matter further with his parents. With their permission, he might want to write to the agricultural club to get a few more questions answered. He can suggest that the club set an example for responsible animal care and breeding by not using live animals. Books, videos, models, and interactive CDs are better choices for learning. If he doesn't get a timely response from the club, he might write to the people in charge of the fair and also send a letter to the local newspaper requesting a change in the policy of using live baby chicks or other animals for the purposes of education and entertainment. Sean has an opportunity to teach his little sister about respecting animal life while putting his thoughts into action.