“Why do sheep have woolly coats?”

A short talk on organic farming for school children

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SOIL ASSOCIATION · ORGANIC STANDARD ·

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CUMBRIA ORGANICS

Soil Association Education Resource

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Speaker's notes

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This pack is designed to enable farmers and community members to present a short, age appropriate talk to primary aged children (5-11). It includes a set of colour photographs to help bring organic farming to life in a classroom context. They are referred to by number in throughout the speaker's notes.

Photographs:
1. Wheat field
2. Apple tree
3. Carrot
4. Dairy cows
5. Organic hens
6. Battery hens
7. Sow with piglets
8. Farm land with hedgerow
9. Food chain
   a. Wheat field
   b. Aphid
   c. Ladybird
   d. Skylark
   e. Kestrel
10. Ladybird & aphids
11. Soil
12. Soil and worms

These notes are designed to act as a guide for your school's talk. It would be great to add to them with examples from your own farm. Bring props and pictures if you think they would be of interest to the children.

The pack also contains the Soil Association's "Little Book of Organic Farming" and biodiversity poster. These are other useful resources that you may wish to refer to before the talk. Additional copies of the "Little Book of Organic Farming" are available on request from the Soil Association's Education Department (0117 314 5000).

Some tips and suggestions for talking to school children:

- It is good to get the children sitting down on the floor and close to you. They tend to concentrate better like this than when they are sitting at their desks. It also means that they will be able to see the props and photographs really well.

- You might want to start with a very short introduction about yourself, which farm you are from and what kind of farm it is.

- If you ask for responses from the children, insist that they put their hands up, and don't call out.

- Try to encourage children by listening carefully to their responses and avoiding any criticism of their answers. They may feel quite timid talking to someone they don't know, and you don't want them to feel silly for putting their hand up.

- Children will listen well for half an hour, so try to keep your talk brief and to the point, allowing time for questions at the end.

Speaker's Notes

1. *Introduction*

Hold up the items you would need for a simple lunch. For example: bread*, cheese, and ham for a sandwich, a tin of vegetable soup, an apple, and a pot of yoghurt. Ask the children where all these items come from. See if they can list the plants and animals that are used to make each food (1-4). Ask them where they are grown/ reared: on farms of course!

*To show more about the bread making process, you could show them some wheat and flour.

Explain that you will talk about a particular approach to farming called organic farming, and about how organic farmers work with farm animals, protect wildlife, and manage the soil.

2. *Farm animals*

What kinds of animals are kept on farms? What are their needs? Food, water, shelter, space to move and the chance to be in a natural family group. Just like humans!

Show a picture of organic hens (5). Ask if they have all these needs met? Now show a picture of battery hens (6) and ask the same question. Explain that many chickens have a cage that is no bigger than an A4 piece of paper.

Show picture of pigs with piglets (7). Explain that organic farmers try to keep pigs and other animals in family groups.

Explain that keeping animals like this is more expensive because you can keep fewer animals on an organic farm. This means that organic meat costs more than other meat.

3. *Wildlife*

What other kinds of animals do you find on a farm? Highlight the fact that there are many types of wild animals and plants that live on farm land, and give some examples.

Animals need food and somewhere to live. What kind of places on farms could be homes for animals? Examples would be hedges, field margins, ponds and rivers. You could show picture 8 here.

Explain that studies have shown that organic farms have nearly 50% more birds than other farms. Why is this? One reason is that organic farmers don't cut back hedges when birds are nesting. In fact they work hard to maintain and improve hedges as they know they provide homes for lots of different animals.

Explain that mixed cropping also provides a wider range of habitats and food for wildlife. You could show the biodiversity poster to show the wildlife that can be found on farms.

Why else? Remind children that organic farmers try to work with nature, and they actually get help from some of the wildlife found on farms….

Speaker's Notes (cont)

Show the pictures of the wheat, aphid, ladybird, skylark, and kestrel (9.a-e) and ask children how these things are linked. Ask for volunteers to come to the front and hold the cards and then ask the children to help put the food chain in the correct order.

Explain that many conventional farmers get rid of the aphids using chemical sprays called pesticides and that the food chain breaks down as a result. Show the picture of the "monster" ladybird eating the aphid (10). Tell the children how organic farmers encourage natural predators like ladybirds to help them with pest control, for example creating beetle banks in fields. This then provides more food for skylarks and other wildlife. Organic farmers also avoid using chemicals that harm food chains and also soil.

4. Soil

What is soil? Ask a child to come and put their hand in a bucket of soil and run it through their fingers (or use picture 11). Ask for suggestions of what soil is made from (It would be great to have a bucket of soil with lots of worms and other "mini beasts" in it).

You could explain that one teaspoon of healthy soil contains one billion organisms with thousands of different species and that there is more life below the soil than above it (picture 12).

Explain that plants can't survive without soil and that it gives them the goodness that they need to grow well, but that soil can be worn out, washed away or poisoned with chemicals.

Show an apple core or some vegetable peelings and explain how these are broken down by organisms to provide compost that is full of goodness which organic farmers and many gardeners use to improve their soil. You could also explain that animal waste can be spread to improve soil.

Emphasize that organic farmers avoid using pesticides, rotate crops so the soil doesn't wear out, and add nutrients from vegetable and animal waste. All this protects and improves the soil.

5. Conclusion

Confirm that we know food is organic if it has been certified. You could show some tins and packets with the certification labels and explain that all these foods and the farms they come from have been carefully inspected to make sure they reach the right standards.

Ask the children got any questions? They may well have some surprising enquiries to make!

Finally, you could give out copies of the "Little Book of Organic Farming" available from the Soil Association and leaflets for your farm if you have them. This would also be a good opportunity to invite the children/teachers to come and visit the farm. Don't forget to thank them for asking you to come and do the talk.

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For more information on Soil Association Education materials and events go to www.soilassociation.org/education