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# Care farms help people recover their better nature

Care farms are part of a growing 'ecotherapy' movement, but do the activities on offer deliver long-term benefits? Bibi van der Zee joins a group of young people to find out



**Bibi van der Zee**  
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A youngster learns horse whispering skills from Tish Feilden on Jamie's Farm, near Box, Wiltshire. Children receive 'farming, family and therapy'. Photograph: Sam Frost

Before breakfast, three young people head down to the woods, struggling a little with the heavy bag of sow nuts. "Just scatter them in different piles," says staff member Jane Brinson, helping them through an electric fence. "If you put them in one place, the smaller pigs won't be able to get anything."

The pigs, which are enormous, surge towards us, and their new feeders step backwards. "I'm not doing that," says 15-year-old Daniel firmly. Sofia, however, who at 14 is a good head shorter than her fellow pupil, hefts up the bag and moves forward, methodically pouring out a dozen small piles of nuts under the trees as the pigs scabble around behind her. "She's a natural," says Brinson admiringly. Sofia does not look up, but a sweet little smile flickers across her serious young face.

The young people are part of a group of pupils from St George's school in west London who have come to stay at Jamie's Farm in Wiltshire. Most of them have never been to the countryside before. For five days, they will get up early, feed the animals, return to the farm to eat a huge breakfast, and then head off to do chores which, this being a farm, are dependent on the season. In late July, they are pulling up coriander that is going to seed from the vegetable beds, feeding calves with farmer Jamie Feilden and helping with the harvest.

But this is not just a gang of young people on a school trip. Jamie's Farm is one of a growing number of care farms across the UK aiming to provide a farm-based therapeutic intervention. The pupils have been chosen by their teachers because they feel they could benefit from what the farm has to offer. Sofia is a young carer in need of respite, Georgia, 14, is extremely quiet, and Sarah, 13, is "full of attitude". Many of the group of 10 are well known in the school's learning support unit, and at least one, Hasan, 14, has recently been temporarily excluded from school.

## Closer bonds

Between helping out on the farm, the young people will also take part in group sessions with the farm psychotherapist who teaches them useful tools for calming down, or for dealing with difficult situations. They can do "horse-whispering" sessions with her, which are one-to-one talking sessions using one of the farm horses as a tool. Phones and sweets are banned, as part of the focus on creating a calm, supportive atmosphere and reducing over-stimulation. The teachers too are encouraged to form closer bonds with their charges and to observe the attentive way that the farm's staff interact with the young people, and the tools that they use to get the behaviour they want.

And the young people seem to be thriving. Aaron, 12, who has had attendance issues, says of the horse whispering: "I feel as though she [the horse] is calm and I'm calm and she's focusing on me. I had to work out how to speak really calmly to make her do what I wanted."

Hasan says: "I expected to be really annoyed and bored, but as soon as we arrived it was fantastic. There's so much space here. You can find your own space, you can express yourself." He says he is regretful now about the exclusion. "It was fair enough really. My school is really cool, they really care about us ... It's funny being here, you feel much calmer. There's time to think."

Like some of his peers, he has a complicated home life. Here on the farm it is clear that he is a lovely, larky boy, but one in need of support and respite.

"They get a chance to be kids again here," says Feilden, during a brief break between feeding the calves and repairing the tractor in the farmyard.

Feilden, who grew up on a farm, trained as a teacher and taught in south London, found himself thinking more and more of the farm. "I even brought some sheep to school. Increasingly, I wanted to give [the young people] a chance to have the experiences – the family, the farm, jumping around on the hay bales – the things that I had growing up, and I started to think about setting this up," he explains.

The psychotherapist at the farm is his mother, Tish Feilden, who has 35 years' experience of working with children and young people. "She was behind it straight away and part of the leadership team as soon as we began to think about it."

In 2006, Feilden, with a couple of other teachers, raised money from grants and a loan from ethical bank, Triodos Bank – which has its headquarters in the Netherlands where the concept of care farms is well established – and started to take children to his family farm in Wiltshire. In 2010, they found Hill House Farm, nearby in Chippenham, and began to adapt it to become Jamie's Farm. The emphasis, they decided, would be on the care aspect, rather than the farming itself, and their income comes from the schools that send children there. Since 2006, they estimate that about 700 children have attended and the farm's annual turnover is now around £400,000.

This particular trip cost St George's £6,000. The money was raised by the teachers using various fundraising methods including a sponsored run.

### **Follow-up visits**

"It may seem like an expensive option," says Feilden, but, he argues, the results justify the cost. As well as a visit to Jamie's Farm, a follow-up includes at least two visits from farm staff to the school the following year. Its data indicates that eight out of 10 children who stay at the farm show a persistent improvement in behaviour. "Schools rebook," Feilden says. "Headteachers ring up and tell me they're rebooking because they're no longer seeing those children in front of them. That's what we want to hear."

The term "care farm" began to be used in the UK a decade ago, after the foot and mouth crisis forced farms to diversify. Some started providing respite or care for vulnerable people in their communities. Now there are more than 80 care farms. Care Farm UK has just been set up in response to demand for a central information hub. Ian Egginton-Metters, a founder of the organisation, says: "There is evidence that 'green

care' works. Mind [the mental health charity] distributes lottery funding for its ecotherapy projects, which are focused around taking people out of institutions and putting them in the natural environment."

But even the most fervent proponents of care farming concede that it can sound "fluffy". There seems to be a wide divergence of opinion on why it works, ranging from those who believe that the farm and the contact with plants and animals itself has a therapeutic aspect, to others, such as David Chantler, head of West Mercia probation trust, who believe that it is all to do with taking people away from their problems.

"If you're working on a farm you are not jacking up at home, or shoplifting in town," says Chantler, who since 2006 has been sending ex-offenders – about eight at a time – to spend five days a week for a period of several months to three care farms in the Midlands.

Ex-offenders are removed from temptation, at a cost of about £50 a day. But, argues Chantler, it is a cheaper and more effective option than prison. "You're being given a chance to work in a community and empower yourself and strengthen your identity ... all the things that prison takes away from you."

Chantler admits that local reoffending figures do not really show the impact, but says: "I can introduce you to several police who will tell you about the people we all know who have turned themselves around thanks to this."

Willowdene, in Shropshire, which Chantler describes as "the best" care farm, offers one-to-one therapy to drug addicts alongside NVQs in forestry, welding or animal management. It claims that in 2010, 92% of the students who completed the programme were still drug-free and holding down a job a year later. Matt Home, Willowdene's head, says: "Working the land isn't enough alone, you need the therapy too. But there's something about coming, as most of these lads do, from very chaotic environments to this place that is therapeutic. You have to take responsibility here, you have to work hard, you are a valuable member of the community. If you don't water the plants or feed the animals, they'll die."

Back at St George's, the teachers report tears from several children on the bus home from Jamie's Farm. After just a week, have the changes stuck? "It's too early to tell, really," says art teacher Rebekah Spalding. "But all week teachers have been stopping me in the corridor, talking about the difference they notice in the children. Georgia stood up and gave a talk to her class about Jamie's Farm; she's putting her hand up in class and participating for the first time ever. Sofia is much more outspoken too, it's done a lot for her confidence. It will have less effect for some of them, but even so, I think they'll remember it for ever."

Spalding also saw Hasan last week, although his exclusion lasts until September, and says she noticed a significant improvement in his attitude.

"And Sarah has already asked if she can go back as one of the mentors in the group next year," says Spalding. The school will be going back then? "Oh yes, there's no doubt about that."

- Pupils' names have been changed.

## Comments

14 comments, displaying Oldest first

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**trystan82**

3 August 2011 9:03AM

I think it's a splendid idea, which can really make children feel they are connected to other beings in a deep, intense way; that they can really communicate and feel themselves. Hope this activities will encouraged to develop also through generous funding!

[Recommend \(18\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Link](#)**Essss**

3 August 2011 9:56AM

These sorts of programmes do work, and it's nothing to do with being 'fluffy'.

Take any child who has no idea of their real capabilities and who may have accumulated negative ideas of themselves (that they are "difficult", "unco-operative" etc) and put them in a different and more positive environment such as a care farm then they will begin to learn more positive aspects of themselves, learn to behave and relate to people and the world around them in different ways, and that can be enough to effect permanent positive changes in attitude and behaviour. Animals and green space help hugely with the process - both are shown to reduce stress arousal response, which for urban kids with difficulties is often highly elevated.

[Recommend \(14\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Link](#)**amesfish2**

3 August 2011 10:07AM

As a social worker I have placed young people at this school in Bedfordshire who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, as there is a farm onsite - they can study animal husbandry and horticulture, seems to really help with there behaviours!

[http://www.continuumgroup.org.uk/Walnut\\_Tree\\_Lodge\\_School.asp](http://www.continuumgroup.org.uk/Walnut_Tree_Lodge_School.asp)

[Recommend \(8\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Link](#)**KuchenCake**

3 August 2011 12:06PM

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).

**shemarch**

3 August 2011 12:11PM

Sounds like a great idea. Contact with animals is known to be of benefit to children, and this seems a good way of providing it. And the fact that the children help with the farm can be an excellent introduction to work habits.

[Recommend \(2\)](#)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Link](#)**AliStein**

3 August 2011 1:18PM

This is something that many children, not just those with

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behavioral problems, would benefit from. All schools should be 'twinned' with a farm. Contact with nature is vital for the development of an intact and stable personality, and school-farm twinning I am sure would reduce the incidence of mental illness (which is a rapidly growing problem) in the population in future.

[Link](#)



**khall54**

3 August 2011 1:44PM

It would be good if practical skills such as farming forestry & welding were taught at colleges like they used to be. I would love to learn such things. Seems they are only offered these days to problem groups - eg I knew of mentally ill people in my town being taught upholstery as therapy, but there are no such classes for the general population.

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**tiffie**

3 August 2011 2:07PM

Must be too early for the "knockers" to be up and about! Nice to see such a positive response from the blogosphere. We run a horse rescue and small farm and get regular visits from a local day care centre for adults. We enjoy showing them round and they get an interaction with animals which, considering their disabilities and behavioural problems, is in some ways normalizing for them. Some, this is very rural Virginia, were originally from farming families or worked on farms. It is rewarding to hear their stories, and see the delight in otherwise withdrawn and non-interacting personalities. So not just children, although I wholeheartedly support the idea for kids and wish we had something like it over here.

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**Jazzactivist**

3 August 2011 2:32PM

I agree with other commentors here. Projects that provide experiences for troubled young people, and adults, to be able to interact with other living things and learn about reciprocal relationships can only be a good thing. The traditional therapeutic approach to recovery from any trauma is often to focus on the self first, but it is impossible to love and respect yourself in isolation if you don't understand how it works. Looking outwards rather than inwards to deal with your own problems leads to more opportunities to experience perspective and good responses. Through caring for and about animals and the land people learn about interdependency, and experience good responses to their care and attention. This helps to build people's confidence in their own ability to be loving, reliable and responsible, which can be very difficult to attain if living within a dysfunctional family within a disinterested or stressed community. People also learn the practical skills involved in caring and taking responsibility, and they can apply that to other situations.

I think therapeutic learning projects like Jamie's Farm need to be given a higher profile, as they are providing an holistic

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opportunity to change people's lives. I don't see any reason why it couldn't develop as a fully run farm, or that rescue centres who often offer this on a voluntary basis couldn't develop therapeutic services. But it would need proper government funding, as is the case in Europe and Scandinavia.



**CannyRogue**

3 August 2011 3:29PM

Great idea - sounds like the programmes really give people (adults as well as kids) an opportunity to think outside themselves and connect with sentient beings who won't judge them.

These should definitely get more visibility and public support.

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**jollyspaniard**

3 August 2011 8:15PM

I can't speak about the program itself but the Cock and Bull festival raising money for it was a heck of a lot of fun. Really good vibe, felt more like a massive party than a festival.

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**KuchenCake**

5 August 2011 9:30AM

Apparently it's forbidden to mention HMP Hollesley Bay, a young offenders institute that used to operate its own farm, with great results.

Two entirely innocuous comments I've made about it have been deleted.

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**FionaLarmont**

5 August 2011 11:49AM

It would be good if this sort of therapy could be made more available to older adults as well as younger people.

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**KuchenCake**

5 August 2011 1:16PM

@FionaLarmont â Hippotherapy is used by the NHS for adults with longterm problems.

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