



## Mecklenburg County Health Department

### A Child Care Providers Guide to Petting Zoos, Farms, And Other Animal Settings

#### **WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR PRECAUTIONS AROUND FARM OR OTHER ANIMALS?**

Petting zoos and farms are fun and educational places for children to learn about animals that they may not usually see. However, precautions must be taken to ensure the health and safety of children during these fun activities. Many animals carry a variety of diseases that may be transmitted to humans and human illnesses have been linked to petting zoos where animal contact has occurred.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published a report of 56 illnesses and 19 hospitalizations in the states of Pennsylvania and Washington due to *E. coli* O157:H7, associated with visits to farms and petting zoos. In 2004, a petting zoo at the NC State Fair resulted in 42 cases of *E. coli* O157:H7. These outbreaks and other related cases have increased the need for measures to be taken to ensure children can participate in these activities in a healthy manner. Children should not be discouraged from attending or participating in petting zoo activities, but it must be done in a manner that protects their health.

#### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

Many farm animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens can be carriers of disease agents. Young farm animals are more likely to be infected than adult animals. Disease agents of concern in a petting zoo or farm environment include *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *E. coli* O157:H7, *Giardia*, and *Cryptosporidium*. These disease agents are passed in animal feces and transmitted to humans by fecal-oral contact. Children can become sick when animals are petted or when an animals' food, water, fencing, pens, or surrounding areas are touched.

Children are particularly sensitive to illnesses since their immune systems are not as developed as those of an adult. They are just learning the importance of handwashing, have little or no understanding of disease processes, and are naturally curious and playful. All these factors greatly increase their risk of disease.

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## **MEASURES TO FOLLOW TO REDUCE THE RISK OF DISEASE TRANSMISSION**

- Wash hands with soap and water after touching animals or their surroundings.
- Do not use baby wipes in place of hand washing, as they do not kill germs.
- Do not allow children to touch their face or mouth before washing their hands.
- Do not have hand to mouth activities such as eating, carrying toys or pacifiers in animal areas.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk or milk products.
- High-risk individuals, such as children under five or those with low immune systems, should use extra precautions. If they have contact with farm animals, they should be closely supervised with precautions strongly enforced.
- Cuts and wounds on children's hands should be covered to prevent direct contact with farm animals.
- Clean children's shoes and outside of soiled lunch boxes or personal belongings, when needed, after visiting animal settings such as petting zoos, fairs, and farms.
- Never allow a petting zoo activity inside a classroom or care area.
- Closely supervise all children when in contact with animals

### **Additional information**

Dogs, cats, reptiles and other domesticated animals are also potential carriers of disease to children. The measures described above apply for these animals too. Children should never be allowed to come in contact with any animal which may carry rabies and whose vaccination history is not known. Visits to farms (strawberry, pumpkin pickings) where animals are not accessible to children, but are still present, can still be places for disease transmission. As above, the same precautions would apply.