



## Chick Incubation and Care Procedures at the Patchogue Medford Library

### The Embryology Program at Suffolk County Farm

The Patchogue Medford Library partners with the Suffolk County Farm & Education Center in Yaphank for this program. The farm requires that new hatchers take a three-hour course discussing how to successfully incubate and how to brood the chicks after they hatch. This course MUST be taken to purchase equipment and eggs through the farm's program. The farm also provides training documentation to the hatchers each year and farm staff are available at any point in the process- incubation or hatching- to provide support and answer questions.

The Suffolk County Farm has altered this program over the years in order to be more sustainable and responsible. They have decreased the number of eggs that a hatcher can purchase to only 8 eggs per teacher. This is being done to decrease the overall number of chicks hatched so there are less birds to rehome at the end.

Elizabeth Ramos in the Children's and Parent Services Department oversees the chick incubation program at the Library. Ms. Ramos has taken the farm's embryology course and has run this program for the Library in years past. She is also a backyard chicken owner for over 10 years and has extensive knowledge on care for both the chicks and adult hens.

### Chick Egg Incubation at the Library

The needs of the baby chicks throughout their development are met just as well with artificial incubation as with natural incubation. The incubator we use at the Library has a temperature and humidity gauge, so we are able to make sure that the eggs are kept in the optimal settings at all times.

The Library also uses an automatic egg turner inside our incubator. The egg turner is designed to rotate the eggs as needed in order to keep the air sac, yolk and baby chick inside all at the optimal position. The egg turner runs 24 hours a day, so the eggs are never in danger of not being rotated when necessary.

Ms. Ramos makes sure to time our chick hatch to coincide with the school's Spring break each year, so the library is always well staffed during those times to keep an eye on the new babies.

The Library also runs a webcam with a live stream of the chick hatch, so eyes are always on the chicks, even when staff are not present throughout the night.

Even if a chick hatches during the evening or overnight when the library is closed, a chick MUST stay in the incubator until it is completely dry which takes a few hours. Baby chicks cannot regulate their own body temperatures which is why they are kept with heat lamps after they are first born. If a chick is moved too soon while it is still wet, it is a shock to their system which can be dangerous to their health.

A few days before the chicks hatch from their eggs, their bodies absorb the egg yolk which keeps them nourished for up to 72 hours AFTER they hatch. They do not need food or water before then.

While they may not have a mother hen that communicates with them before they hatch at the Library, research suggests that chicks begin to communicate with each other from inside their shells. When we get close to the end of the 21-day incubation cycle, we are sometimes able to hear their chirps from inside the eggs. Once one chick hatches and starts to chirp, it encourages the other chicks to come out too which proves they are still able to communicate with each other without the presence of a mother hen.

### Living at the Library

Once the chicks are completely dry after they hatch, Ms. Ramos moves the new babies into their own brooder. They are kept warm with heat lamps and are given plenty of food and water. Their brooder is cleaned regularly to ensure the chicks are kept in clean living conditions.

Ms. Ramos trains library staff how to hold the chicks properly. Only library staff is allowed to hold the baby chicks.

We do let families pet the chicks if they want to and we use the "one finger rule" - people can only use one finger when petting the babies and we encourage our patrons to very, very gentle because the chicks are delicate. We are careful to observe the chicks over time so we get familiar with which chicks like to be held and which don't. We do not want the chicks to be stressed in any way so we tend to only hold the chicks that like being held.

The Library encourages hand washing both before and after touching any of the chicks for sanitary purposes. A bottle of hand sanitizer is kept on the table with the chick brooder and we also recommend that children thoroughly wash their hands in the bathroom after they pet the chicks.

Chicks naturally form their own hierarchy and establish their own "pecking order." This is a natural part of their development and social structure and happens with either the incubation from the mother hen or with artificial incubation. We keep watch over our chicks to make sure that no chick becomes too aggressive to the point where they are bullying other chicks.

### What happens at the end of the program?

At the end of their time at the Library, people often ask where to the chicks go. All chicks must be returned to the farm so they can be examined by farm staff.

At the Suffolk County Farm, the chicks are NOT euthanized when they are returned to the farm. The only time the farm ever euthanizes a chick is if the chick has a health issue where they will not recover or have quality of life and they are humanely euthanized, so they do not suffer.

The Suffolk County Farm keeps their chickens in either spacious chicken coops or in their barns where they can be safe. Brooding boxes are also set up in the offices of farm staff so that the baby chicks can be monitored with a closer eye.

The Suffolk County Farm puts the female chicks up for adoption for people to raise in their backyard flocks. Roosters cannot be adopted out because the Town of Brookhaven does not allow roosters on residential properties. Chicks do NOT go to just anyone. If someone is interested in adopting the female chicks, they must speak with the farm directly and the farm staff educates them on proper chick care. The chicks are adopted out only if the farm staff believe the chicks will be going to homes where they will be cared for properly.

Staff from the Patchogue Medford Library have adopted the chicks we have hatched in the past, but only after returning chicks to the farm to be examined and given permission from the Suffolk County Farm to take them home. The Suffolk County Farm has the final say where the chicks go at the end of the program. If patrons are interested in adopting baby chicks, they can contact the farm directly.