

# Studying farm animals: What about sheep?

**Editor's note:** This is the second article in a series about farm animals. See "Studying farm animals: What about horses?" at [www.childcarequarterly.com/pdf/winter19\\_horses.pdf](http://www.childcarequarterly.com/pdf/winter19_horses.pdf).



Spring can be a perfect season for children to learn about sheep because it's the time for shearing and livestock shows. But regardless of when you offer the farm animals theme, you'll find lots of learning activities to use throughout the classroom that introduce this woolly animal.

## Background

Sheep are believed to be one of the earliest animals that was domesticated, providing milk, meat, and wool. They were important in major ancient religions and literature, including the Greek myth *The Golden Fleece*.

Spanish explorers brought sheep and other animals to missions and ranches in the Americas. Sheep ranching gradually became an industry alongside cattle ranching, although in the American West, feuds sometimes sprang up between the two in competition for pastures and water.

Most sheep in the United States are white, and their faces are white

or black, depending on the breed. Sheep can also be brown, gray, black, red, or spotted. Occasionally, a black sheep is born into a white flock because of a recessive black gene. Sheep ranchers typically don't like black sheep because, unlike white wool, black wool cannot be dyed into other colors. This occurrence has given rise to the term *black sheep of the family*, which refers to a person who behaves oddly or makes bad choices.

Sheep can range in weight from 100 to 200 pounds (a female, or *ewe*) to 350 pounds (adult male or *ram*). A young sheep is a *lamb*, and a group of sheep is a *flock*. A person who tends a flock of sheep is called a *shepherd*. Today farmers and ranchers may herd sheep using a dog, often the Border Collie.

Flocks need tending because sheep are virtually defenseless against predators, such as wolves,



coyotes, and feral hogs. The idiom *a wolf in sheep's clothing* has its origins in Aesop's Fables and Christian Scripture. It refers to people who disguise their true intentions and pose a threat.

Sometimes it's hard to tell a sheep from a goat because of their similarities. The best way to differentiate them is their tails. A goat's tail goes up, while a sheep's tail hangs down (and is often cut short for sanitary reasons). Goats prefer a diet of leaves and twigs that they find above ground, while sheep prefer short, tender grasses and clover on the ground. In addition, goats tend to wander independently to follow their curiosity, while sheep like to stay with the flock. (The word *sheepish* means sheep-like—that is, shy or awkward.)

Some sheep and most goats

have horns. One species of horned sheep live in the mountainous and desert areas of North America. The Bighorn, as its name reveals, grows large curved horns that can weigh up to 30 pounds.

Shearing occurs once a year, usually in early spring to relieve the animals of their heavy coats before summer. Shearing pregnant sheep before their lambs are due encourages the ewes to seek shelter to avoid endangering their newborn lambs outdoors.

After shearing, the fleece is cleaned, spun into yarn, and made into fabric, to be used for coats, sweaters, tapestries, and rugs, for example. The wool may be blended with other, often artificial, fibers to lower cost, improve a garment's durability and shape, and simplify washability. The first shearing, often around 7 months of age, is

called *lambswool*, which is short (around 3 inches), soft, and elastic. *Merino* wool, grown by Merino sheep from Australia, is often softer than wool produced by other sheep breeds. Like the wool produced by sheep, other animals produce protein fibers used commercially in the manufacture of clothing, rugs, carpets, and blankets. These animals include angora goats that produce mohair, the cashmere goat that produces cashmere, the angora rabbit that produces angora, and members of the camelid family including alpaca, llama, camels, and vicuñas.

*Sheepskin* is the hide of a sheep with the wool on. It's made by obtaining a fresh hide from a slaughterhouse, removing any remaining flesh, covering it with salt to cure, soaking it in an acid bath, and letting it dry. When made into a coat or boots, the fleece is on the inside, and the hide on the outside. The resulting sheepskin leather is lightweight and used to make coats, shoe lining, wallets, rugs, and car seat covers.

## Introduce children to sheep

The ideal way to introduce children to sheep is a live experience that allows children to see their size and shape, hear them "Baa," smell their environment, and touch their fleece. One possibility is a field trip to a farm, ranch, livestock show, or petting zoo.

If a live experience is not possible, arrange for a rancher, farmer, or county agricultural agent to come to your program and show pictures or a video. The person may explain where sheep live, what they eat, and how they are sheared.

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



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You can provide a visual experience by showing videos or films. Search online for YouTube videos that show sheep living on a farm, being tended, and getting sheared. Be sure to preview any video before showing it to children. Remember that you can select which scenes to show, silence the audio, control the length, and adapt in other ways to be appropriate to the children in your care.

## Learning activities

You probably already have farm animal activities for learning centers. The ones below are adapted to highlight sheep.

## Book/Library center

Read books about sheep at story time. Then leave the books in the center for children to look at on their own. Some choices:

**Barclay, Eric. (2019).** *Sheep Dog and Sheep Sheep*. A little sheep loves to dance, but when she accidentally bumps into a big sheep dog, she tries to help him do his job. After three scary—but humorous—attempts, she realizes she has it all wrong.

**Barnett, Mac. (2012).** *Extra Yarn*. Acclaimed illustrator Jon Klassen guides the celebration of the discovery of a secret stash of colorful yarn and the extravagant knitwear (even sweaters for things that don't wear sweaters) produced.

**Borgert-Spaniol, Megan. (2016).** *Bighorn Sheep*. Color photographs show this wild species in its native habitat and describe its physical characteristics. Part of a series on North American animals, the book is a great addition to the preschool science center but

may be a bit challenging for school-agers to read on their own.

**Boynton, Sandra. (1982).** *Moo, Baa, La La La!* This popular board book for infants (as well as adults wanting silliness) offers a delightful poem that require you to make the sounds several animals make, including the “Baa” of the sheep.

**Brett, Jan. (1989).** *The Mitten*. Brett retells the traditional folk tale about a white mitten dropped on white snow and becomes a snug home for winter cold animals. Illustrations are whimsical and full of the detail that pulls readers into the cold landscape to find the warmth only wool can provide.

**dePaola, Tomie. (1982)** *Charlie Needs a Cloak*. A young shepherd sets out to make his own cloak, shearing, washing, combing, weaving, and sewing the fiber from his flock—just in time for winter. DePaola offers a gentle and accurate introduction to sheep and the wool they produce.

**Hemming, Alice. (2019).** *Sheep on the Run*. When Farmer Green becomes ill, little boy Lee offers to feed the sheep and pigs. Unfortunately, he forgets to close the sheep pen. He somehow manages to herd the sheep back into their pen—except for one.

**Lester, Helen. (2007.)** *The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing*. In this humorous reversal of a centuries-old idiom, an attention-seeking sheep wears a wolf's outfit to a costume ball. But no one invites her to dance—until a tall, handsome stranger arrives. The kinky illustrations by Lynn Munsinger and witty wordplay (“Ewureka!”) will delight school-agers as well as adults.

**Murray, Julie. (2016).** *Sheep*. This

24-page book, with a single brown sheep, on the cover, is perfect for 3- and 4-year-olds. Color photographs show sheep in their natural habitat, and the simple text is great for beginning readers. The book was published by Abdo, an educational publisher, which offers 5 other books on farm animals.

**Nelson, Robin. (2013).** *From Sheep to Sweater*. Each step in the production cycle is clearly and accurately described with full color photos and simple text.

**Shaw, Nancy. (2015).** *Sheep Go to Sleep*. This book describes in rhymed text how a faithful sheep dog manages to get five sheep settled down to sleep. Author Shaw and illustrator Margot Apple have collaborated on several books about sheep, including the acclaimed *Sheep in a Jeep!*

## Music/Movement center

Nursery rhymes are traditional favorites for enhancing children's language development. Musical renditions of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Baa Baa Black Sheep” offer an activity for your music center.

### “Little Bo-Peep”

(This rhyme was probably based on a children's game and published in 1805. Collected in Mother Goose nursery rhymes, it has many variations.)

Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep,  
And can't tell where to find them.  
Leave them alone, and they will  
come home,  
Wagging their tails behind them.

### “Mary Had a Little Lamb”

(This rhyme first appeared in the early 1800s in a book of poems by Sarah Hale. The inspiration was a real incident in which a child took her pet lamb to school.)

Mary had a little lamb,  
Little lamb, little lamb.  
Mary had a little lamb.  
Its fleece was white as snow.

And everywhere that Mary went,  
Mary went, Mary went.  
Everywhere that Mary went  
The lamb was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day,  
School one day, school one day.  
It followed her to school one day,  
Which was against the rule.

It made the children laugh and  
play,  
Laugh and play, laugh and play.  
It made the children laugh and  
play  
To see a lamb at school.

### “Baa Baa Black Sheep”

(This rhyme is believed to have been written in England in 1731, perhaps as a complaint against taxes levied at the wool trade. The music for the song is a variant of a French melody.)

Baa baa black sheep  
Have you any wool?  
Yes sir, yes sir,  
Three bags full.

One for my master,  
One for the dame,  
But none for the little boy  
Who lives down the lane.

Baa baa black sheep  
Have you any wool?

Yes sir, yes sir,  
Three needles full.

One to mend a jumper,  
One to mend a frock,  
And one for the little girl  
With holes in her sock.

### Science center

Set up a sensory experience by providing several different types of fiber that children can examine with a magnifying glass. Some examples: natural wool fiber, cotton, a strand from a mohair sweater, dog hair, and human hair.

Glue or tape one end of each fiber to a small strip of cardstock. Encourage children to compare thickness, straight versus wavy or *crimped*, and color. Chart the differences and similarities. Can they guess the source of each fiber?

### Art

Invite children to mold a sheep out of play dough or clay. To make the project manageable for them, show how to roll the clay in sections—an oval for the head, a barrel shape for the body, and 4 stick-like shapes for the legs. Children can stick the pieces together and use a pencil to make eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Accept all attempts. Remember the goal is to encourage children’s creative expression.

Some children may want to draw a sheep and then paste cotton on it to represent fleece. They can use a marker to color the face.

### Weaving

Invite children to make a weaving that can be used as a bookmark or a wall decoration.



## Make a loom

A loom is easy and inexpensive to make using a cardboard square or a shoebox. Provide one for each child.

### Here's what you need:

- a 10-inch square of cardboard or cardstock
- scissors
- ruler or tape measure
- pencil
- sturdy cord, about 15 inches in length

1. Use a ruler to mark a 1-inch-wide margin on each side of the square.
2. On top and bottom sides, between the margins, mark every half inch. Make a straight 1-inch vertical cut, from the top edge to the top margin. Do the same on the bottom, from bottom edge to the bottom margin. You will have 16 notches on each of the top and bottom edges.
3. Insert one end of the cord in back of the first notch in the top left corner. Wind it two or three times around the notch to hold it securely.
4. Draw the cord down to the bottom edge, insert it in the first notch on the left, and wind it to hold it securely.
5. Pull the cord to the corresponding top notch and pull it down to the bottom. Make sure it's tight, not loose.
6. Repeat for each notch until you have 16 vertical lengths of cord, each about 8 inches long. These cords form the *warp* of the weaving.
7. Wind the remaining end of the cord securely at the bottom right corner.

## Make a weaving

Videos of weaving instructions are abundant online, such as this YouTube video: "How to weave with a simple frame loom," at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=61jdqH0Ji\\_4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61jdqH0Ji_4). Choose one to show children or use the instructions below.

### Here's what you need:

- photo or sample of a weaving
- loom (see above)
- yarn of various colors and types
- other weaving material including natural wool fiber, cotton fiber, embroidery thread, ribbon
- large crochet needle
- dowel (or twig) about 10 inches long

1. Show children a photo of a weaving, but emphasize that they are free to use whatever

materials and colors they wish to encourage creativity.

2. Demonstrate how to place a length of yarn on the hook end of the crochet needle and weave the yarn horizontally in and out between the *warp* (vertical cords). These horizontal yarn lengths form the *weft* of the weaving.
3. Continue weaving, using different yarn or threads as desired. Press up against each woven row with the needle or fingers so that each row fits snugly between the others.
4. Unwind the warp at each corner of the loom. Slip a dowel through the warp at the top of the weaving, and gently pull the warp away from the loom. With fingers, push the weaving up close to the dowel.
5. To finish, knot the warp at the



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top left and bottom right corners.

## Dramatic play

Set up an area indoors—or better, outdoors—to represent a farm or ranch. Set up a farm scene (red barn, green pasture, blue sky), perhaps using the farm mural children painted in the art activity in the “Horses” activity in the Winter 2019 issue. Set out a bale of hay, a plastic tub for a water trough, and wheel toys for farm vehicles.

Offer props such as stuffed animals to represent sheep and a sheep dog, straw hats, work gloves, bandanas, suede vests, boots, and rope. Consider including an old barber’s clippers (with cord removed) so children can pretend to shear a sheep.

## Manipulatives

Some children may have heard the maxim about falling asleep by counting sheep. The technique is supposed to work because of its monotony, but one group of researchers found that a better way is to imagine a relaxing scene, such as ocean waves on a beach or a beautiful waterfall. See [www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/health/16real.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/health/16real.html).

Nonetheless, counting by one-to-one correspondence, rather than memorizing numerals, is a fundamental skill that preschoolers can master. Use this folder game in your math and manipulatives center.

### Here’s what you need:

- pocket folder
- 8 x 10 photo or illustration of a farm yard or pasture

- photo or illustration of a sheep
- copy machine
- clear, adhesive-backed vinyl or laminator

1. Make 10 copies of the farm scene, and print a number on each from 1 to 10. Laminate each.
2. Make 50 copies of the sheep, fitting about 10 per page. Laminate each page and trim the sheep images.
3. Place the farm scenes in one pocket of the folder, and the sheep in the other.
4. Invite children to select a farm scene from the folder and to identify the number of sheep for that farm. The children can then count out the appropriate number of sheep and place them on the pasture.

## Cooking and snack

With experienced young cooks, consider making cheese from sheep’s milk, using a recipe from the Internet, such as one from this link: <https://halftheclothes.com/how-to-make-cheese-with-sheeps-milk-3-pecorino-cheese-recipes/>. The first challenge will be to find pasturized sheep’s milk. Try a local farmer’s market or the ubiquitous Amazon.

Otherwise show slides from an online source, such as [www.instructables.com/id/Basic-Steps-of-How-to-Make-Cheese/](http://www.instructables.com/id/Basic-Steps-of-How-to-Make-Cheese/). Talk with children about how cheese is made.

At the supermarket, look for a cheese made from sheep’s milk. Imported ricotta, feta, Roquefort, and Pecorino are possibilities; read the label to make sure it’s made from sheep’s milk.

For snack, invite children to use



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plastic knives to cut squares of a variety of cheeses and place them on a serving plate. Offer crackers with the cheese and invite children to serve themselves. Ask children to describe the color, taste, smell, and texture of the cheese.

Variation: Offer other cheeses made with cow's or goat's milk and ask children to compare similarities and differences.

## Outdoor play

Play the hide-and-seek game with children pretending to be sheep.

### Here's what you need:

- yellow caution tape, 24-30 feet long
1. Use yellow caution tape to mark a large square, about 6 feet on each side, with room enough for all children to move around inside.
  2. Children pretend they are sheep, milling around a farm yard (inside the square) and saying "Baa Baa Baa." Choose one child to be the shepherd and instruct that child to keep eyes firmly shut while one of the pretend sheep hides.
  3. Choose one child from the square to be the lost sheep. This child will hide behind a bush, tree or other spot.
  4. First the shepherd tries to guess which child is missing. The other children keep moving and saying "Baa, Baa, Baa" to confuse the shepherd.
  5. When the shepherd correctly identifies and locates the lost sheep, that child becomes the shepherd. Another child becomes the lost sheep, and the game continues until everyone has a chance to be the shepherd.

## Video resources

These YouTube videos will interest older preschoolers. Stop and talk with the children about the images, and give lots of time for questions and comments.

### How is my sweater made?

<https://youtu.be/SvVdBcckOA0>

This video is fast with no narration and only background music. It highlights processes from sheep shearing to the manufactured processing of wool into yarn.

### From sheep to sweater

<https://youtu.be/U7Tw4pqyhck>

Australian merino are featured in this 3-minute clip. Some children might notice the Australian accent of the narrator and includes explanations of each step in the process of transforming wool into cloth. ■