

What was the role of children on an 18th-century Virginia farm?

Children on a colonial Virginia farm had a number of chores to do. The work they did and the education they received was different for boys and girls. Children began working on the farm at a very young age. They were given simple tasks such as sweeping, washing dishes, feeding chickens and other poultry, collecting eggs, picking and stringing vegetables for drying, topping the tobacco (removing the flowers to encourage the leaves to grow bigger), and picking tobacco worms off of plants. As they grew older, children were given more chores, often following in the footsteps of their father or mother. Some chores might include tending tobacco, looking after younger brothers and sisters, and caring for the farm animals.

Because there were no public schools in Virginia until the 1800s, children often learned everything they needed to know at home. Sometimes wealthier or upper middling families hired tutors to come and live with the family and teach the boys at home. Simple schooling might be available from a local parish minister. On a small farm, boys with parents who were literate were taught how to read, write, and do simple math problems to prepare them for their future jobs of running the farm, making purchases, and dealing with farm accounts.

Most young girls learned skills such as housekeeping, laundry, cooking, food preservation, gardening, raising poultry, knitting, sewing, carding wool, spinning, and child-rearing from their mothers. They also learned how to use herbs to treat illness. Girls might be taught by one of their parents to write their name and read the Bible. Hornbooks, simple tablets of horn or wood, served as textbooks. On them were carved the alphabet, numbers, and sometimes Bible passages or sayings. Books were expensive, and the only book many families owned was the Bible. Aesop's fables were popular children's stories which entertained and also taught moral lessons.

In a few cases older boys and girls worked for master tradesmen as apprentices. Apprentices worked five to seven years with a tradesman. During those years they helped the master do important work, learned the skills of the trade, and received an education.



Helping to cook



Helping to dry tobacco



Picking beans



Helping with housekeeping



Carding wool



Tending the chickens and collecting eggs



Minding younger siblings



Washing clothes



Learning from a hornbook



© Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation
P.O. Box 1607, Williamsburg, VA 23187

