

Farrowing crates

This can be a particularly difficult time to provide sows and piglets with appropriate enrichment, but when done well, there are many benefits.






Shredded paper and straw being used for sows in farrowing crates (AHDB Pork).





Benefits of enrichment pre-farrowing:



- Enables the expression of nest-building behaviour before farrowing, both gathering the materials and manipulating them.
- This may result in a more settled sow during farrowing with fewer postural changes and therefore less chance of piglet crushing.
- It has also been shown to improve milk let-down.

For sows

Suggested materials for how to provide enrichment for sows in farrowing crates can include:

Enrichment Material/Item	Suggested Properties and level of interest as enrichment	How to present it	Practical considerations
<p>Straw</p> 	<p>Optimal (edible, chewable, investigable and manipulable)</p>	<p>Provide at the head end of the crate. Add new straw twice a day.</p>	<p>Small quantities of chopped straw is more compatible with slurry system, but may not be suitable for all systems. Significant cost and time associated with use.</p>
<p>Hessian cloth sacks (or jute/burlap etc.)</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – of limited investigable quality)</p>	<p>Provide suspended at head of crate, but ensure it cannot hang down into the feeder or drinker. One or half a sack as thick a material as possible. Provide as available, and replace as required.</p>	<p>Must be within easy reach of the sow to avoid frustration. Be aware that any long sections that break off may block slurry systems if they pass through slats. Cloth sacks made of natural materials and fibres are best. From 50p/sack. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>
<p>Natural rope (eg sisal or hemp)</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – maybe edible and investigable, but not always)</p>	<p>Can be wound around the bars at the end of the crate or suspended vertically. Knots can be added to the rope to increase complexity and make it more difficult to break pieces off. Appears to hold the pigs' interest best when¹⁹: -A sisal rope about 1 m (40 in) long is used -The diameter of the rope is about 14mm (approx. 1/2 inch)</p>	<p>Must be within easy reach of the sow, but not piglets (to avoid accidental crushing against bars). Thicker rope is better and less likely to pass through slats. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>

		Replace when required (i.e. if damaged or soiled).	
<p>Root Vegetables (eg turnips, fodder, beet swede)</p> 	Optimal (edible, chewable, investigable and manipulable)	<p>In the feed trough. Surplus root vegetables are good. A couple could be put in the trough daily. Replace daily or as required.</p>	<p>Root vegetables can take up space in the trough which will encourage sows to root for their feed as well as exploring the root vegetables. Be careful not to provide too much, and consider supplementary nutritional value to overall rations. Avoid parsnips. Depends on season and availability. Significant cost and time associated with use. Must not be kitchen waste.</p>
<p>Strong hosepipe</p> 	Marginal (chewable and manipulable – not edible or investigable)	<p>Can be wound around the bars at the head end of the crate. 1 metre length. Replace as required</p>	<p>Must be within easy reach of the sow. Should be thick enough not to pass through slats. Should be complimented by optimal or suboptimal materials.</p>
<p>Paper or cardboard</p> 	Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – maybe edible and investigable, if not recycled)	<p>Paper can be provided shredded as a partial bedding. Provide as available, but enough to avoid competition and squabbling. Replace as required.</p>	<p>Care must be taken to ensure there are no staples, to avoid harm to the pigs. Shredded paper can be obtained at a cost. Recycled paper and cardboard is much less suitable as it may contain toxins from print ink etc. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>
<p>Plastic dog/pig toys</p> 	Marginal (maybe chewable and manipulable depending on design – not edible or investigable).	<p>In the feed trough or suspended on short rope or chain at head of the crate. 1-2 toys provided. Once sow begins to lose interest, replace with another toy or enrichment material. Replace when required (ie if damaged or soiled).</p>	<p>If suspended, ensure the rope/chain is not long enough to endanger the sow or piglets. Minimal installation in terms of time. Can range in cost from cheap to expensive. Some commercial items available. Should be complimented by optimal or suboptimal materials.</p>

			
<p>Fresh wood (virgin – recently cut not dried)</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – maybe edible and investigable, but not always)</p>	<p>In the feed trough or suspended on short rope or chain at head of the crate. 1-2 pieces depending on size Replace every week so that it remains interesting.</p>	<p>Make sure there are no sharp edges and that the wood is not dried or splintering, and will not cause harm to the pigs or the pen. Fresh cut softwood wood stimulates more interest as it is more odorous. Hardwoods can be harder to chew. Pigs can manipulate wood better if it is suspended. Should be thick enough not to pass through slats. Avoid yew, which is poisonous to livestock. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>

Stimulating interest and providing an activity for pigs is a useful way to boost their wellbeing. Varying the objects on a weekly basis also provides novelty.



Shredded paper being provided ineffectively for sows in farrowing crates – should be at the head of the crate (AHDB Pork).

For piglets

Stockmen will recognise that piglets begin rooting and exploring from the very first few hours of life. Initially this is to locate the teat, but even once this is established, piglets continue to root, explore and manipulate objects.

What are the benefits of enrichment for piglets?

- Piglets show better behavioural and social development, reducing aggression that could be directed towards their littermates or the sow.
- It may also improve piglets' ability to cope with new situations such as weaning and being moved to new housing.
- If piglets are able to direct their exploratory behaviour towards enrichment materials rather than their pen-mates from an early age, they are less likely to revert to undesirable behaviour later.
- Additionally, providing pre-weaning enrichment has been linked to improved finishing performance and carcase/meat characteristics²¹.

How to be confident that the enrichment is appropriate?




Pigs that do not have sufficient or appropriate enrichment can show vice behaviour.




Signs in sows can include;

- Excessive drinking or chewing on nipple drinkers
- Biting the air (sham chewing)
- Biting the crate bars or feed trough
- Sows standing more than usual, or changing position frequently or pawing at the ground

All of these signs can also be early indicators for a health breakdown so monitor your stock closely.

Suggested materials for how to provide enrichment for piglets in farrowing crates can include:

Enrichment Material/Item	Suggested Properties and level of interest as enrichment	How to present it	Practical considerations
<p>Straw</p> 	<p>Optimal (edible, chewable, investigable and manipulable)</p>	<p>Can be provided loose, as a few handfuls daily, or from a rack or dispenser, from day 2-3 onwards. Replace as required.</p>	<p>Small quantities of chopped straw is more compatible with slurry system, but may not be suitable for all systems. Significant cost and time associated with use.</p>
<p>Hessian cloth sacks (or jute/burlap etc.)</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – not edible and of limited investigable quality)</p>	<p>Can be suspended, attached to the side of the pen in the creep area, or loose. Provide half a sack at a time, from day 2-3 onwards. Alternatively, sacks used by the sow, but clean, can be given to her piglets suspended or loose in the creep area. Provide as available, and replace as required.</p>	<p>Be aware that any long sections that break off may block slurry systems if they pass through slats. Cloth sacks made of natural materials and fibres are best. From 50p/sack. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>
<p>Natural rope (eg sisal or hemp)</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – maybe edible and investigable, but not always)</p>	<p>Can be suspended or wrapped around pen fittings away from the crate. Knots can be added to the rope to increase complexity and make it more difficult to break pieces off. Provide enough rope pieces to avoid competition and squabbling. Replace when required (ie if damaged or soiled).</p>	<p>Thicker rope is better and less likely to pass through slats. Should be complimented by edible and investigable materials.</p>
<p>Paper or cardboard</p>	<p>Suboptimal (chewable and manipulable – maybe edible and</p>	<p>Paper can be provided shredded loose, as a few handfuls daily, or from a rack or dispenser, from day 2-3 onwards.</p>	<p>Care must be taken to ensure there are no staples, to avoid harm to the piglets. Shredded paper can be obtained at a cost.</p>

	<p>investigable, if not recycled)</p>	<p>Replace as required.</p>	<p>Recycled paper and cardboard is much less suitable as it may contain toxins from print ink etc. Be aware that large amounts may block slurry systems. Should be complimented by more edible and investigable materials.</p>
<p>Woodshavings</p> 	<p>Suboptimal (investigable and manipulable – but offer limited edible and chewable qualities)</p>	<p>Can be provided loose, as a few handfuls daily, or from a rack or dispenser, from day 2-3 onwards. Replace as frequently, or daily.</p>	<p>Be aware that large amounts may block slurry systems. Significant cost and time associated with use. Should be complimented by more edible and chewable materials.</p>
<p>Plastic dog/pig toys</p> 	<p>Marginal (maybe chewable and manipulable depending on design – not edible or investigable).</p>	<p>Present either suspended on rope or chain, or given loose in the pen from day 2-3 onwards. Provide enough toys to avoid competition and squabbling. Once piglets begin to show no interest, replace with another toy or enrichment material. Can vary suspending toys and providing them loose. Replace when required (ie if damaged or soiled).</p>	<p>If provided loose in the pen, toys can become quickly soiled, and reduce in interest. Should be changed regularly to try to maintain pigs' interest. Minimal installation in terms of time. Can range in cost from cheap to expensive. Should be big enough not to pass through slats. Some commercial items available. Should be complimented by optimal or suboptimal materials.</p>



Example of straw being used for piglets in farrowing crates (AHDB Pork).

Further tips for providing enrichment for piglets in farrowing crates:

- Varying the enrichment each week is a good way to stimulate interest and maximise the effectiveness of enrichments provided.
- Try to ensure the enrichment materials don't get too close to the crate to avoid overlays or crushing injuries.
- Remember chains alone are not sufficient.
- Any enrichment material left behind after weaning must be washed and disinfected (eg hosepipe) or replaced (eg rope, sacks).

How to be confident that the enrichment is appropriate?

Pigs that do not have sufficient or appropriate enrichment can show vice behaviour.

Signs in piglets can include;

- More aggressive behaviour to their litter-mates, usually chewing and biting
- This can also be directed at the sow or pen fittings
- Unsettled piglets
- Increased noise.

All of these signs can also be early indicators for a health breakdown so monitor your stock closely.