



A Letter from Spike



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A LETTER TO CHILDREN

Hi there!

I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Spike and I belong to the species *Erinaceus europaeus*, more commonly known as hedgehogs. I am happy and healthy, and I am not a pest. In fact, I'm quite a helpful fellow to have around as I will happily gobble up the bugs and grubs in your garden. I'm what you might call a natural pest controller.

I live here in this garden, but I'm not confined to this area. I travel long distances on my nightly foraging, looking for tasty meals. It's a great life!

Snoozing all day and roaming at night, this is what is known as being nocturnal. You humans are diurnal, awake by day and asleep at night.

I quite like the human folk who live at the end of my garden - they can be very helpful. They put out cat or dog food, and always leave a shallow dish of water, delicious on a warm evening. We hedgehogs, although we need a natural high protein diet of worms, bugs and grubs, do enjoy a variety of foodstuffs, like Zina (she's my Aunt) who adores dog food, and Titch (he's my big brother) thinks cat biscuits are a delicacy not to be missed!

Did you know we sleep all winter? Well, hibernation is not really sleep; but our bodies slow down their use of energy during very cold weather when natural food has disappeared. We only breathe once every few minutes in hibernation! We live off our body reserves - these are the brown and white fatty deposits which we build up during the plentiful season. The absolute minimum weight we should be in autumn is 450grams (1lb); we need to weigh at least this amount to survive the period of hibernation. If a hedgehog doesn't put on enough weight before he hibernates he might not be able to wake up, which would be very sad. If you find one of my friends who, by hibernation time (November/December), looks a bit on the skinny side, please try to fatten him/her up. We need to be 'fat' to survive the wintertime; if you find one of us that you are concerned about, please call our friends at the British Hedgehog Preservation Society for advice.



Thinking of hibernation makes me feel cold and I think about the horrible scare I received last year. I woke from deep hibernation to find myself being lifted upwards towards the sky, I thought that perhaps I'd grown wings and had learned to fly. But no - I twitched and all my spines were intact. No wings had sprouted during my hognap.

Mary, the eldest girl who lives at the house, called to her sister to watch out in case Hoggy (that's her name for me) was asleep in the dead leaves. Luckily for me she called because I'd been gathered up with the dead leaves and I was about to be stacked on the November bonfire. Just imagine if the pile had been burnt with me in it! So please take care when you are building your bonfires. Check under any pile of leaves as it is a cosy place to hibernate.

They have a dog here. It's a great lollopy creature, called an Afghan hound, and it dashes frantically about the garden. At my first meeting with it I was scared; I rolled myself into a tight ball - clever this trick! How's it done? I'll tell you later, but this fooled the dog; it tried pushing me along with its nose, but my sharp spines hurt it. The dog leaves me alone now and instead it chases sparrows.

The spine trick? Well it's a clever action done with muscles. When we are young our muscles are weak and undeveloped. It takes time to get this trick right; I'm an expert! The action is complicated, but I'll try to explain. It's the contraction of special muscles in my skin. One pair of muscles pull my spiny skin forward over my head (like frowning, only harder) then another pair of muscles also pull my skin backwards over my bottom. The skin is stretchy, so it is like I am inside a spikey bag; everything is tucked in out of sight. With practice I can do the whole thing before you say, "hog's dinner". I look like a prickly ball with my 5,000 creamy white and brown spines sticking out. I can stay like this for hours, it's a great defence trick against most enemies.



Yesterday, I was out having a stroll by moonlight, when I met my old chum, Snuffles. He's a character: he's the best swimmer, digger and climber in these parts. Also, he tells wonderful stories. Well, he told me a sad tale which made my spines stand on end. He's an ardent traveller and his adventures take him far away. He has been known to cover between one and two miles (about 2 or 3kms) in one night. I'm not so energetic! He'd been out the night before and he'd seen several of my friends lying squashed on the road. The journey from one field to another is always a dangerous business, sometimes it involves crossing a busy road. There's one particular road which is a favourite place to cross; the gardens opposite have some tasty food on offer, but it's also a deadly spot. Please tell the grown-up humans to take care as even our tough spines can't save us from being run over by cars.

Snuffles also told me about the scare he had last summer when, on the lookout for food, he had found a yoghurt carton. He knows yoghurt is bad for hedgehogs but decided to try it anyway! He got his snout and head inside and gobbled up the contents, but when he'd finished found his spines were wedged inside the carton and

he couldn't get out. Luckily, he managed to break free and, by using his sharp claws, he shattered the plastic and escaped. If he hadn't, he would have died from starvation, a horrible slow death. Children, please avoid such accidents by taking home all of your litter which is very dangerous to us animals.

Elastic bands can cause us problems too. We can become entangled in them and sometimes they cut into our skin. Posties drop these sometimes when delivering letters, so please ask yours to take care not to litter the bands.

Did someone mention fleas? Yes, we do sometimes have them, but we don't need them. Sometimes we get them from our mother, not a very nice gift. Our fleas are host-specific which means they much prefer to stay on us hedgehogs!

Another way you can help us is by tidying away netting in the garden; tie up the football goal net and tennis nets when not in use. Secure the strawberry and pea nets at a height we can safely pass under. Please take care and save us from a horrid accident. Also, take care when using the garden mower or strimmer. These can cause nasty accidents to both you and us. Slug pellets may also be dangerous to us as some might contain poison. Avoid using these substances in the garden, try organic methods instead.

Well, thinking about food and the amounts we hedgehogs consume makes me feel hungry. I'll dash now (did you know I can run 30-40 metres in a minute? That's two miles an hour. Snuffles travels at six miles an hour over short distances - I told you he was fit).

Well, I'll be seeing you about. Please take extra care and look after us, we are your spiky friends and Britain's only spiny mammal!

Love, Spike

*Adapted from a story by
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