



Early Years and The Environment

How to Be More Sustainable



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Sustainability in early childhood education is an important part of the curriculum and should be incorporated into each service setting. Creating natural environments and providing natural materials in one way for sustainability to occur. This eBook will provide you with strategies on promoting sustainable education for educators and children and ideas on incorporating sustainable practices within the service.

What is Sustainability?

Sustainability is “environment education”. Learning about the environment and how natural systems function. It’s everything that we need for our survival and wellbeing relating directly to our natural environment.

As children, the world fills us with awe and wonder. The environment has a huge impact on children, because of our constant interaction with it. That’s why sustainable practices are an essential element of early learning centres and education programs.

As we move through the 21st century, we are more aware of the impact our decisions have on future generations. Climate change, resource shortages and our throwaway mindset make nurturing a love for nature and the environment an obligation.

Living sustainably means living within the capacity of the natural environment to support life and ensuring our current lifestyle has minimal impact on generations to come. Sustainable practices relate not only to the natural environment, but also our society and culture, including aspects such as consumerism and community well-being.

As the need for greater sustainability becomes more apparent globally, so does the importance of embedding sustainability in children’s programs. Through hands-on experiences and relevant educator pedagogies, children can explore and learn about their local contexts and environmental issues. They can develop the creativity and critical thinking skills necessary to make informed decisions for change, improving the quality of their lives, and those of future generations.

Why should be childcare providers Sustainable?

The path to a more sustainable Earth will depend on how we educate the next generation. We want children to grow up with an understanding of how to look after the planet, and in turn, go on to influence others with their behaviour. The earlier you can teach these core principles, the better.

It's also about more than just teaching children the lessons that matter.

You can also consider:

- The actual impact that running your business has
- The positive influence that you have on staff
- The positive influence you can have on parents

It can be a unique selling point for your childcare business too. Honesty and care about how you treat the environment is indicative of care in general, and this is part of why parents trust you to look after their child. You can also help to ease some of that environmental guilt that many parents feel, as they know they are making an ethical decision by choosing you.



At Xap, we have always felt that with tiny steps, you complete a marathon. I get really frustrated with people saying that it doesn't make any difference, or that it needs to be China and other countries that have to change things.

Why sustainability matters

The world is moving in a dangerous direction, and if we want our children to grow up into a natural world anything like our own, we need to act now. Pollution, excessive waste, and carbon emissions are damaging our planet.

A warming globe and wasteful behaviour could threaten food stocks, increase extreme weather, lead to flooding, and destroy precious ecosystems. Eco learning centres, a worldwide movement for more sustainable early education, recommend nine areas where we can reduce our impact.

These are:

- Paper & Ink
- Energy
- Litter
- Waste
- Water
- Global Perspectives
- Transport
- Healthy Living
- Biodiversity



All childcare providers worry about money and time. But what trumps all of that are the children. We're planning for a future generation and whatever you're doing will leave a footprint that they have to grow up into.

Plastic and the throwaway society

For the team at Xap, reducing plastic is one thing that can have a big impact on the throwaway attitudes that are harming the planet.

“Plastic toys are pretty indestructible,” points out Stephanie, “and a child might just throw it on the floor and never consider picking it up. The staff don’t consider it either, so generally, there are no consequences.” With a china or ceramic cup though, it’s not going to survive that same drop. So, there’s a consequence – it’s gone.

“We live in a throwaway society, and what are we teaching our children when you can just throw a teapot down and it doesn’t really matter?” asks Lyndsey. “These children will be the caretakers of this planet and if we’re not teaching them these lessons at a young age then what hope have we got?”

“On the other hand, if you’re recycling and sourcing open-ended resources and natural materials, you’re bringing different elements, textures, feels and smells. That sense of curiosity and wonder will come with it.”



How to be more sustainable

Now that we know why sustainability is important, let us get onto some of the ways you can make your childcare centre or Kindergarten facility a more environmentally friendly place.

1. Recycling

Recycling can help us to save a lot of waste, and it also gets children to think about the things they use and where they end up.

You probably have separate bins for your waste, provided as a service from your local council. But why not go further by getting some kid-sized bins so they can get involved in the sorting? Print pictures and words on them for easy, visual understanding!

2. Reuse and repurpose

Don't just throw away materials that could be suitable for play. You could collect toilet or kitchen roll cardboard to paint patterns on, for example. Then these same rolls can be used again in an additional activity – why not try making cardboard binoculars with the children?

Really try to avoid disposable, single-use items such as plastic cutlery and straws as much as possible. Teaching children that the materials they use aren't just something to throw away will make them more mindful when using things in the future.

3. Use less paper

Registers, reports, learning journals, staff rosters, accident forms, meal logs... it all adds up! Making sure you are environmentally sensitive in your communication with parents and other key people is a great way to cut the cost of paper and its impact on the environment too.

Why not take a minute to consider whether some of your paper-heavy tasks could be handled digitally instead? And when you need to use it, make sure to look out for forest-friendly paper products.



Paper waste comes on all sorts of different levels. Paper that the children draw on, toilet paper and paper they wipe their hands with. It's hard to believe how much you get through in a childcare centre and if all of these things are recycled or chlorine-free then it makes the world of difference.

4. Purchases

Where you can, buy in bulk to reduce packaging waste (and save money). For example, you can look out for recycled aprons and splash mats when you need new ones and remember to put the old ones to good use too.

Try to collect natural materials for play, like feathers, conkers, pinecones, or sticks. Just remember to take only what you need and use them respectfully.

Don't always feel you have to buy 'new' – head to your local charity shop to find some fun and diverse resources. When you do buy new things, try to make sustainable equipment purchases – wooden toys and tables, rather than bad-quality plastic which you will have to replace in a few years.

5. Make use of the outdoors (and your green fingers!)

If you are lucky enough to have some green outdoor space, consider cordoning off a section to grow some flowers, fruit or veggies. A little patch should be cheap to make, and you will hopefully make it back in whatever you decide to grow.

If space is limited, don't stop at pots... tires, colanders, old shoes, and teapots make great sustainable flower or vegetable containers. It's great for children to find different uses for these everyday items too and see recycling in practice. Have a look at growing potatoes, peas, broad beans, and runner beans – they're a good place to start.

Another, perhaps more adventurous, idea to consider is keeping ani-mals. Chickens are low maintenance and are low-cost to keep – and think of all the eggs! Not only good for the environment, keeping ani-mals can promote social and emotional health for your children too.



Composting is such a pleasure. In six month time, you can use that compost in your garden and that's really satisfying for the children.

6. Crafts

Given how often children draw and paint, changing the types of paints, pens and glitter you use can be one of the easiest environ-mental wins.

When we wash up after crafts, glitter and paints with nasty chemicals in often find their way out into water systems or the sea. Choosing alternatives or cutting down on your usage can prevent these dangerous chemicals or micro-plastics from killing fish and polluting the sea.

7. Food and drink

Cutting down on our consumption of meat (red meat and eating more locally sourced food can have a big impact on our carbon footprint. Going organic can have a big impact on the health of your children too because they use far fewer pesticides than traditional farming does.



The Dirty Dozen' are the best foods to eat organic because usually they get sprayed by fertilisers on average five or six times. There is a second list containing foods sprayed less regularly, which are fine to buy non-organic so long as you can get them locally sourced.

8. Water conservation

With water being such a precious resource, teaching children to use it wisely is vital. Just by leaving out a water tank in the rain for watering plants, you are introducing the concept that water can be reused in a sustainable way. Make sure your little ones know how to flush the toilet properly too, so, they're not wasting water by over-flushing.



...And that's not all

Keen to learn about other ways you can positively impact the environment? Here are just some of the things that some of our centre directors do to be more sustainable.

Why not pick a couple and see if they could work for you?

- Recycled and FSC materials for stationery and crafts
- Fair-trade and/or organic food
- Grow vegetables and fruit
- Encourage wildlife in the garden
- Eco-friendly cleaning products – no bleach
- Eco-friendly sewage systems
- Use renewable energy sources. Install solar panels for electricity and hotwater.
- Incinerate rubbish, recycling the energy
- Low-energy lightbulbs
- Rainwater for watering
- Composting and recycling
- Local suppliers and tradesmen to encourage green miles
- Recycled cotton wool and paper
- Biodegradable wipes
- No phosphates in washing powder
- Organic cotton staff uniform
- Recycled-plastic coats



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How to get everyone involved

Being eco-friendly is about more than just the impact of your business or the impact you have on your children. Your environmental tentacles can reach everyone who you interact with at your setting. Here's a full excerpt from our interview with Antoinette from 123 early learning centre on just that.

The parents

For Antoinette, getting parents onboard with her mission is about being as transparent as possible about her costs.

“Parents are happy to pay that little bit extra knowing that we have higher costs in order to do what we do,” she says, “because it releases a little bit of guilt from them too.”

At the end of the day, parents care too, and by showing you care about these issues, you can stand out from the crowd.

For those who don't? “We organise special parents or grandparents' days all the time,” Antoinette says. Forest care days where the parents can come in and explore nature with their little ones make an impact too.

“It just helps to reiterate to parents that this stuff is important. It's easy to get busy and keep your head down, but when you hear about environmental issues people do realise how important it is.”

The staff

“I’m a bit of a mother hen,” Antoinette tells me. With all staff under her, she realises the influence she can have. “There’s a lot of young girls who work for me,” she explains, “so it’s good to see them interested and ask questions about how they can make skincare or makeup choices that have a more positive impact.”

Staff at 123 early learning centres also receive:

- Three free natural treatments a year
- Nutritional organic lunch with the kids
- Regular fruit and veg boxes
- Big Christmas and summer parties

Of course, none of this comes cheap, but looking after her staff’s wellbeing has a broader impact on her eco-friendly mission. “I want them to talk to the parents about these issues too,” Antoinette explains. “I don’t want them to give it lip service either and that’s why we do these things, because that’s when it’s not genuine anymore. Parents can tell if it’s not real.”



Don't Just Throw Away

Binning toys and resources just to bring in new ones is no way to teach children the importance of sustainability. Some ideas for recycling the things you don't need anymore **include:**

- Making your own car boot and sell them on
- Popping bigger items on eBay
- Donating to charity settings who might have a different ethos
- Giving to charity shops
- Donating to charities who help rehouse refugees or domestic abuse victims who have to start again
- Re-using toys by dismantling them to create loose parts, or finding a new application for it

Pester power

Getting the kids involved with feeding the chickens, composting and recycling doesn't just teach the children those important lessons either. "Pester power is one of your most powerful tools," Vanessa says.

"A friend of mine who runs a local attraction told me that if he could convince children to come back or ask to go in the shop they have there, that pester power is worth an absolute fortune. I tried to harness that pester power thinking about recycling."

It works too. Vanessa is always hearing back from parents whose children are asking them 'Where's our compost bin?' or 'Why can't we re-cycle more?'. "It's just about drip-feeding information and explaining that we do have a responsibility to do something about it," she says.



How to Save Money

Eco-friendly doesn't always mean wallet friendly. Here are some top tips from Vanessa on how they keep costs down in order to afford their more costly sustainable initiatives.

On bulk buying

By bulk buying paper, we can get a massive reduction in price. We even buy wet wipes by the pallet and then share them between the nurseries. It can be a pain to transport them between the nurseries, but it saves us a fortune.

On taking it bit by bit

You don't have to do everything we do. You can just pick literally one thing - one thing can make a heck of a difference.

On nappies

I had some criteria - chlorine-free, no petroleum-based plastic and no phthalates. In the end, we came down to the Aldi Mamia nappy. It fit every single one of my criteria, but was a fraction of the cost.

On going wholesale

If you can guarantee a certain amount of produce over a certain period, most companies will give you wholesale prices. When we started out, we paid up front for pallets of wipes, receiving the delivery bit by bit. This meant we could still get the savings without having to store thousands of wet wipes.



On just asking

If you don't ask, you just don't know if they'll do it. A lot of these things, you have to put in some time and energy in the first instance, but once you've got it set up, you've got it for life.

On working together

childcare groups can often make savings due to economies of scale. They can guarantee a lot more business for a supplier, so they get discounts. But if you're not a chain, setting up a local buying collective with other providers can give you exactly the same advantages.

Further Reading

The Sustainable Development Goals by The UN - This page tracks the 17 sustainable development goals set out by the UN to identify the global challenges we face. The aim is to achieve each goal by 2030.

Sustainability Practices In Childcare by The Aussie Childcare Network - This article has some great actionable ideas to be more sustainable. The section of ideas on more eco-friendly cleaning is particularly good.

Education for Sustainable Development in The Early Years by The OMEP - An lengthy but fascinating document from 2010 which really focuses on the effect of sustainability on child development.

The Contribution of Early Childhood Education by UNESCO - This collection of 20 articles from all around the world pulls together perspectives on early childhood and sustainability from Chile to Liberia, Japan to Sweden.

Eco-Schools: How Does It Work by Eco-Schools - A simple guide to the principles of the Eco-schools movement.

The Early Years Eco-Schools Guide by Liverpool John Moores University - Information on how the eco-school's principles can be applied to the early years and the EYFS in particular.

The Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development Framework (ECEFS) by Liverpool John Moores University - These lengthy and poorly laid-out guides are nonetheless brimming full with useful pointers on how to work with the ECEFS, a specialist framework developed to help early years settings to be more sustainable. Patience with the ugly format is worth it for some of the highest quality information we found.

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