



Sustainable Practices for Early Years Educators

If you ask a child what they want to be when they grow up, you might get an answer like, “a superhero, a fire-fighter or an astronaut. If you ask them what they want to DO when they grow up, you may be surprised if one or two of them say then want to “save the planet”.

Children learn quickly and even those in our nurseries and pre-schools are learning the importance of sustainability and our role in it, even if their well-meaning solutions may seem a little simple to us at this age. But given a few more years, and an ignited interest in the environment, science and technology, who knows what these bright young minds may come up with?

We are all responsible for the world we live in, whether we are a Head of State or a citizen of the realm and we all have a duty of care to leave it in a habitable way for our children and their children. We might not always be able to affect change on a national or international scale, but there are many things we can do on a day-to-day level that can have an impact on our future... starting with making our early years settings sustainable in the long term.

There are two main areas of our businesses that early years practitioners can look at in relation to this:

1. What we do in our settings to make them sustainable
2. What and how we teach our children about sustainability

Of course, these two areas are not mutually exclusive but interconnected. Children learn by watching the adults around them so both areas are important if we want to future-proof our sector. This guide will help you look at both areas to maximise the impact you can make.

Sustainability in context

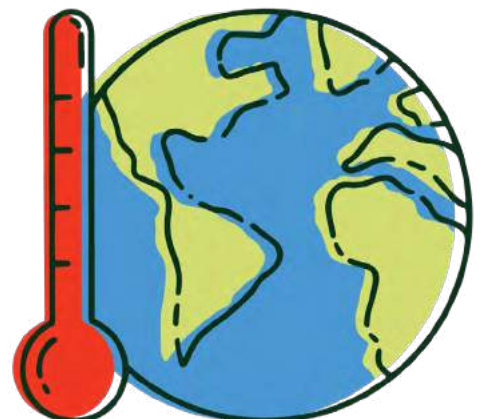
The Paris Agreement

In 2015, at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, 196 parties signed what is now known as “The Paris Agreement” – a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted on 12 December 2015 and came into force on 4 November 2016.

Its overarching goal is to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and pursue efforts “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.” In recent years, world leaders have stressed the need to limit global warming to 1.5°C by the end of this century although collectively, the world has already passed this as we have already seen higher temperatures sustained for more than one year.

The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggested that by crossing the 1.5°C threshold, we risk severe climate change impacts, including more frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves and heavier rainfall. And the changing weather patterns and climates we have seen globally in recent years would bear out this warning.

One of the main factors driving global warming, is greenhouse gas emissions, so the Paris Agreement called for drastic reduction of these by 43% by 2030.



The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Everyone interested in helping our planet and concerned about the sustainability of everyday life should know about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. According to the UN's website:

"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

The SDGs build on decades of work by countries and the UN, including the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#)."

There are 17 SDGs which are:



All these goals are important if we are to move the planet forward and we all need to engage with them, or at least start working towards the targets set within them. A lot of the goals align with aspects of early years practice and pedagogy, such as SDG12 about responsible consumption and production, and SDG5 promoting gender equality.

The goals are challenging and ambitious, but the Earth needs us all to become more environmentally aware and even better, become ecological heroes, and what better place to start than the early years?

So, what actions should we be taking now to ensure sustainability of the sector and the planet?

1. What we do in our settings

In our March 2024 Parenta magazine, we suggested there were 4 steps to considering sustainability in your practice and we have expanded on these below:

1. Step one: Take an audit of where you are with regards to sustainability, recycling and work out your carbon footprint.

The main aim of The Paris Agreement is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are causing global warming. However, it is unlikely that your nursery is producing masses of greenhouse gases in the same way that a traditional power station did. However, what you do day-to-day has an impact on total global emissions due to the choices you make. Are you using an energy supplier that supports or uses green energy for example? How do your children get to the setting? Are they being driven when they could walk, adding to total emissions. Doing an audit of all aspects will give you more information on which to base your actions.

2. Step two: Set SMART goals that you can work towards.

Once you have done your audit, you should set SMART goals to improve. The audit will reveal areas that you can work on within the setting such as:

- 🌱 Energy consumption – your gas, electricity and energy companies as well as the way in which those companies generate energy, e.g. green energy or fossil fuels
- 🌱 Your water consumption – do you have leaking taps or are taps left on accidentally?
- 🌱 The effectiveness of insulation and other energy saving features you have such as light bulbs
- 🌱 Turning off lights and equipment, not leaving them in standby mode
- 🌱 Reducing heating by turning down radiators, thermostats and boiler settings
- 🌱 Reducing food waste and over-purchasing generally
- 🌱 Increasing your recycling
- 🌱 Changing to biodegradable products
- 🌱 Eliminating single-use plastics
- 🌱 Re-assessing your use of disposable and reusable nappies
- 🌱 Checking the products you use for sustainability such as paper, art and craft supplies – can you change to greener products?
- 🌱 Reducing the number of deliveries that are made to and for your setting
- 🌱 Looking at how your staff and children get to the setting and promoting greener alternatives to cars
- 🌱 Organising donation points for clothes, toys and books etc. to help cut down on waste

It is unlikely that any setting will be able to tackle every item at once, so you will need to prioritise a list of the ones you feel are most important and focus on improving those. Setting SMART goals means giving you and your team targets to work towards, in the same way that the UN's SDGs set goals for governments. SMART goals just ensure your own goals are:

- 🌱 **S – specific** – e.g. increase recycling by 50% within one year
- 🌱 **M – measurable** – the above goal meets this as you could measure the number of bags of recycling you generate at the start and at the end of the target period
- 🌱 **A – achievable** – the goal should be something that is achievable by you and your setting
- 🌱 **R – realistic** – the goal should be realistic – the above example could be achieved and within a realistic time frame if everyone thought more about what they threw away
- 🌱 **T – time-bound** – the above goal gives an end date of one year. After this time, it would be wise to revisit the goal and set another target based on the new normal

3. Step three: Take actions to achieve your goals

This step involves following through with **ACTIONS**. If your goal is to reduce your food waste, then you will need to have better planning in your shopping, only buying what you need and then finding new ways to use any food which is left over.

It is important to get staff buy-in for any goals or actions you have because if all if your staff are not all working together, then your impact will be limited. Introduce your sustainability ideas to staff at the initial planning and audit stage, so that they can add their perspectives and ideas too.

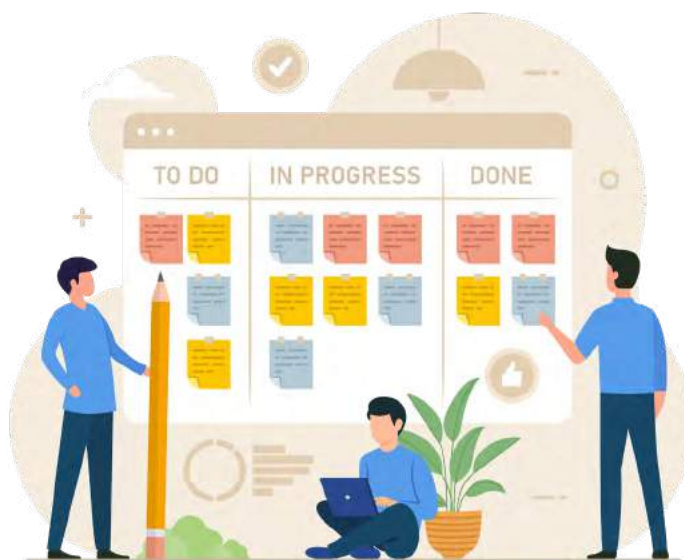
4. Step four: Review your progress and return to step one from your new vantage point

This involves measuring your progress (for example, whether you did manage to increase your recycling) and revising or resetting goals accordingly.

Like with all feedback, it's important here to look at the positives and what has been achieved before you focus on more ways to improve. For example, if your setting increased its recycling by 30% instead of the target of 50%, then you should be proud of what has been achieved and celebrate that, as well as looking again at ways to improve the final amount.

As noted in our March magazine article, the Federation for Small Businesses has a lot of advice for small business owners on how to make their businesses more sustainable on their [Sustainability and Net Zero Hub](#).

They have a free downloadable guide to help businesses get started and you can sign up for their newsletter too. They also have a free "Little Book of Net Zero" that you can download at: <https://pages.bsigroup.com/l/35972/2023-12-14/3t76lq3>



2. What and how we teach our children

The second part of making our early years settings sustainable is about how we encourage an interest in the planet and sustainability in our young children. In April, 2022, the Government published their strategy for sustainability for education and children's services in England through the Department for Education which can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy/sustainability-and-climate-change-a-strategy-for-the-education-and-childrens-services-systems#context>.

The strategy asks practitioners, educators, students and children to "become empowered as global citizens, to be better connected to nature and understanding of the impacts of climate change." This is in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 13.

There are 5 areas of action that are being proposed:

- 🌱 **Action area 1:** Climate education
- 🌱 **Action area 2:** Green skills and careers
- 🌱 **Action area 3:** Education estate
- 🌱 **Action area 4:** Operations and supply chains
- 🌱 **Action area 5:** International



There is a National Climate Education Action Plan which outlines a plan for all educational institutions on how to improve climate education. It can be found at:

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/planet/climate-education/climate-education-plan>. Whilst a lot of these areas are still in development, we as early years educators should be thinking about our curriculum and asking ourselves what else we can do to encourage an interest in, and a care for the natural world.

What does this mean in practice?

The EYFS supports a lot of education about climate change and the natural world, and there are many resources online that settings can use to teach children about sustainability. We've listed some interesting ideas below:

- 🌱 <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/enabling-environments/view/how-to-create-an-eco-friendly-early-learning-environment>
- 🌱 <https://www.mbkgroup.co.uk/how-to-make-your-nursery-more-eco-friendly/early-years-news/>
- 🌱 <https://www.earlyyearsresources.co.uk/blog/2023/08/eco-friendly-activity-ideas-for-early-years/>
- 🌱 <https://inventorsof tomorrow.com/2018/01/22/diy-weather-station-for-kids/>

In 2022, the NCFE published a document “Sustainability Matters in Early Childhood” by Boyd, King, Mann and Neame which is designed to support the early years sector with practical advice and case studies of how to engage parents and children with the SDGs. It is not about making huge leaps forward, but starting with small steps to embed sustainability and climate education within the setting. The document can be found at: <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/media/p1socs4v/sustainability-matters-in-early-childhood-resource.pdf>

It has been developed from the wider document “Early Years Sustainability Resource” which can be found at: <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/media/xbcbjrfj/early-years-sustainability-resource.pdf>. This document helps early years settings with all the SDGs but again, it is full of information and practical advice.

We have also listed below some simple, practical things you can do in your setting to help with climate education.

- 🌱 Read books to inspire curiosity and an interest in the natural world
- 🌱 Talk about the stories in circle time and allow children to express their own opinions and ideas
- 🌱 Grow things in your setting, whether that is in a garden or outdoor space, an allotment or in pots on a windowsill – this will help children learn about how to look after plants and factors that can affect them, such as lack of water/too much water, heat, light etc.
- 🌱 Keep animals or pets (be aware of allergies in your setting). You could consider traditional things like rabbits, hamsters and mice, or also chickens, miniature goats or a tortoise – children would learn about how to care for the animals and could perhaps take it in turn to look after them at weekends and during the holidays
- 🌱 There are commercially available packs to buy to help children learn in a practical way such as butterfly/ant houses or wormeries. These also help children learn about life cycles and decay
- 🌱 Have an obvious recycling bay in your setting and encourage the children to recycle things from their lunches, wastepaper and plastic bottles. Use visual labels to make it clear for children
- 🌱 Organise a local litter pick
- 🌱 Set up a compost heap and use the compost once ready to grow things
- 🌱 Collect food waste to recycle
- 🌱 Monitor the weather with a weather station – you can make your own or buy simple ones
- 🌱 Consider trips to open air spaces such as parks, beaches and woodlands and have an ecological aim for the trip
- 🌱 Enter awards and kitemarks related to sustainability such as:
 - Climate Action Awards - <https://nbn.org.uk/national-education-nature-park-and-climate-action-awards>
 - Green Tree Schools Award - <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/support-us/act/your-school/green-tree-schools-award/>
 - More awards - <https://www.direct-ed.co.uk/306550-2/>

Participate in awareness days such as:

- Earth Hour Day - www.earthhour.org/
- Global Recycling Day - www.globalrecyclingday.com/
- Find a calendar or more awareness days here - <https://greenecofriend.co.uk/environmental-awareness-calendar/>

Sustainability is important and the scale of climate change can sometimes feel overwhelming. However, it is important to realise that we can all do something, however small, and teaching our youngest citizens early on, being a good role model and following through on our action plans will all have an effect which can add to the whole.

Resources and more information

<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/five-free-ways-to-make-your-business-more-sustainable.html

www.earthhour.org/

www.globalrecyclingday.com/

The Big Garden Birdwatch – The RSPB (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/get-ready-for-big-schools-birdwatch>)

[A Future Without Waste learning resource with LEGO Group – Ellen MacArthur](#)

Foundation (<https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/news/new-learning-resource-launched-with-lego-group>)

[Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children’s services systems - GOV.UK](#) (www.gov.uk)

<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sowing-seed-sustainability-early-years>



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