



You could use this list as a framework for making an audit of how sustainable your current practice is. This can be as simple as listing what you know happens outside already and what you have that enables this. Celebrate what you are already good at, then plan for further action.

Food and drink

Children **“must be supported in using all of their senses to learn about the world around them and to make connections between new information and what they already know. They must be supported in developing an understanding of the importance of physical activity and making healthy choices in relation to food.”**

Early Years Foundation Stage

Sustainable food production includes reducing food miles and using methods which are not harmful to the environment. Growing food in your grounds not only demonstrates sustainability, it also encourages children to eat healthily. You'll be amazed at how children are more likely to try fruit and vegetables if they have been able to help grow, pick, clean and prepare them.

You do not need a great deal of space to get children interested in growing food since many crops grow well in planters or hanging baskets. Choosing quick-growing crops such as baby leaf salad varieties, that can be grown and eaten in 3 weeks, mean children will not have long to wait to enjoy harvesting. These can keep interest going while slower crops mature. Careful planning will ensure that you have something to eat at most times of the year, especially if you can find space for a mini-greenhouse – the zip-up PVC versions are inexpensive and ideal for small children, and will get seeds off to a flying start.

There are many sources of information to help you plan your food growing – ask staff and parents if they have expertise to share. Garden Organic (formerly HDRA www.gardenorganic.org.uk/schools_organic_network/index.php) can provide specialist advice. Grow organically not only to demonstrate sustainability but also because pesticides and herbicides can be dangerous chemicals. Weeding is an ideal job for small hands – make sure only the weeds get pulled up! Slugs and snails can be removed by hand, while other pests

Small steps to sustainability

There are many definitions of sustainable development, but in the end what it comes down to is care:

- Care for oneself
- Care for each other (across cultures, distances and generations)
- Care for the environment (near and far).

The daily experiences of young children shape their knowledge and understanding of the world and the attitudes and lifestyles they then go on to adopt. Good design, continual care and management of early years settings will help children to be active participants in a sustainable lifestyle. This Playnotes seeks to give ideas for simple experiences of fun times outdoors, where care for themselves, for others and for their environment is at the core.

Environmental education for the early years focuses primarily on young children exploring and enjoying the world of nature with the companionship, care and guidance of attentive adults. Very young children learn best through experiences that relate to what is already familiar and comfortable, so keep your outdoor environment simple and provide them with ongoing opportunities. Don't expect them to watch and listen for long periods of time, or follow your agenda, but do express your own sense of wonder in nature, as feelings are just as important as facts when it comes to the world of nature.

Give children the opportunity to look closely at the world around them, show curiosity, ask questions, find out about what is outside and explore how they feel about features. Their preferences will enable them to connect with the natural world and develop an emotional attachment to it.

“We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.”

Native American proverb

A framework for sustainable schools

Education policy across the UK promotes learning about sustainable development, including the learning surrounded by sustainable design and management in schools and settings. Your outdoor space has a vital role to play in demonstrating sustainable practice.

It is useful to think about the different elements involved in sustainability:

- Food and drink
- Energy and water
- Travel and traffic
- Purchasing and waste
- Inclusion and participation
- Local well-being
- Global citizenship
- Buildings and grounds.

such as aphids are often not too much of a problem in gardens where natural predators such as birds and ladybirds are encouraged. If you do have problems with pests, there are several suppliers of organic solutions, such as Green Gardener (www.greengardener.co.uk).

Even without growing food on-site, children can learn good food habits through visits by organic farmers or gardeners, and tasting sessions of freshly grown fruit and veg. You should also provide children with the opportunity to refresh, socialise and learn – with access to drinking water throughout the day.

Some settings advocate keeping livestock for helping children learn about the origins of their food and drink. In these settings animal welfare is a priority so children will know that animals need to be cared for properly, treated with respect and that their needs are met. The RSPCA website (www.rspca.org.uk) offers resources on wildlife in your grounds, pets and farm animals.



You can take this learning further by introducing green technologies. Consider creating a place outdoors that showcases different forms of energy such as sun, wind or pedal. A list of suppliers of suitable technology is available on our website (www.itl.org.uk).

Travel and traffic

Sustainable travel requires us to provide the facilities for less polluting forms of travel, and equipping children with the necessary skills to use them. Travel methods which are healthy for the environment are also part of a healthy lifestyle.

excursions may encourage more children and parents to make use of the healthy lifestyle and valuable learning available to them simply by walking to your setting.

Purchasing and waste

The messages of sustainability are reinforced through the materials you choose for your outside area. Think about each new product you purchase. Whenever possible ensure materials such as wood are from sustainable sources; use locally-sourced materials; buy goods that have recycled content in them or in the packaging – there is little point recycling lots of materials if there is no demand from people wanting to buy recycled goods. Also aim to purchase durable equipment that can be repaired.

The 3Rs – Reduce, Reuse, Recycle – prompt us to tackle the causes of waste.

Reducing

Many goods we buy are often over packaged. Make a conscious effort to effect some very simple changes to your buying habits and encourage parents to think along these lines too.

- 1 Take along your own shopping bags when you go shopping locally for snacks or cooking ingredients with the children.
- 2 Try to buy products that have minimal packaging and / or packaging that you know can be easily reused or recycled. For example: choose loose fresh fruit / vegetables over pre-packaged options; avoid individually wrapped items such as variety packs of cereal. Food products which have a reasonable lifespan can be



Energy and water

“Through planned activities, exploration and investigation children should find out about forces and movement, light, sound and electricity.”

Draft Framework for Children’s Learning in the Foundation Phase, Wales.

Early years practitioners are aware of the value of learning outside, whatever the weather. Learning about renewable energy sources starts with experiencing the power of wind and sun first hand. Keep weather resource boxes to hand for children to notice, feel and respond to the forces of our ever-changing climate. Play can include chasing shadows or capturing them with chalk outlines; directing collected rainwater along pieces of cut off guttering and enjoying racing twigs or other ‘boats’; playing with the force of the wind using ribbons attached to elasticated wrist bands or home made kites.

“Sustainable development will enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations.”

Securing the Future, the UK Government’s 2005 sustainable development strategy

Ask your parents and staff to think about the method of transport they use to get to your setting. Can they set an example by reducing the pollutants and congestion associated with car use? Can your setting be more active in supporting the parents who take the time to walk? For example, do you provide pleasant sheltered spaces and seating for parents while they wait for their children?

Teaching road safety through play and reinforcing this knowledge on trips and

bought in larger packets and then stored in reusable containers.

- 3 If children stay to lunch, a small plastic bottle refilled with drink will produce less waste than individual cans or cartons (and will be cheaper); a reusable lunchbox is better than throw away plastic bags.

Reusing

Keeping up with repairs will give your facilities as long a life as possible. If you're making improvements to your grounds, think about how you could reuse materials. Existing old or unused features in your grounds could find a new life – make a home for minibeasts with the wood from the shed.

Use scrap materials to create an interactive pergola, a waste sculpture or a mosaic; unwanted paint can be used for colourful outside murals. Develop an outdoor creative workshop area which can be equipped with Scrapstore and recycled materials. Find your nearest Scrapstore by visiting:

www.childrensscrapstore.co.uk

www.en-form.supanet.com

www.reducereusecycle.co.uk

or contact your local Play Council / Forum or Environmental Health Department. Alternatively, local businesses, builders and timber yards might be able to offer you items they are throwing out, such as offcuts of card, fabrics, etc. (and if the amounts become too much put them in touch with your nearest Scrapstore!) Old clean household rubbish can also be used for art and craft activities.

There are many networks which support reusing materials, from the collection of glass bottles to local Freecycle groups



which provide a way to offer or request unwanted items by email (uk.freecycle.org). Local charity shops will welcome donations of unwanted items if they are in saleable condition.

Disposable nappies are a huge contributor to landfill waste, so if your setting cares for very young children, consider using biodegradable or washable nappies – there are organisations which will collect and wash them for you.

Recycling

Using recycled materials sends a strong message, so let everyone know this is part of your policy for sustainability. Also look at how you can collect materials for recycling - develop a recycling depot for clothes, cans and paper.

Composting is an excellent way for children to learn that, although we produce a lot of rubbish, a lot can be recycled and will help produce healthy plants. It's easy to do and takes minimal time – most local authorities allow you to buy cut-price composters or simple ones can be made by stacking tyres.

Kitchen waste in compost bins can attract flies, so if this forms a large part of your organic waste, a wormery would be more suitable – keep your compost bin for garden waste. Wormeries are multi-layered, allowing concentrated liquid plant feed to

collect at the bottom, while compost collects in higher levels. Wormeries use particular composting worms, not ordinary earthworms. If you have built a wormery make sure that sufficient air can get in and that there is drainage at the bottom so that the worms don't drown in the liquid produced.

General hints for successful composting:

- Only use uncooked items such as vegetables, fruit, teabags, eggshells, hair and shredded paper. Don't add meat or cooked foods as this will simply attract rats and flies.
- Place your composter on bare earth (not necessary for a wormery).
- Use a bought base or one made from chicken wire if rats may be a problem.
- Turning the compost with a fork every couple of weeks to allow air in can hasten the process.
- Add small amounts of water if the contents are looking dry.

Don't forget to recycle water too. Put the water from the water tray onto your garden, or use it to clean off chalk patterns on paving, rather than emptying it down the drain. If you have a suitable space install a water butt and let the children use the water on your plants. As with composters, many local authorities offer discounts on water butts.





Inclusion and participation

All children should feel welcomed and able to access safely all areas of their interesting and challenging grounds. Diversity needs to be supported and celebrated outdoors, through the features of the grounds, and the activities which take place there. Try holding circle times and reflection times outside as well as in, and observe how children respond differently.

Even young children are able to be involved in the design and maintenance of their outdoor area. Opportunities to help maintain the grounds can be as simple as helping to sweep the sand or put things away after use. Use different ways to consult with children to find out more about their needs and preferences, likes and dislikes, to help shape the development of this shared outdoor environment.

Local well-being

Outdoors can be a place where parents and other members of the local community can learn or pass on new skills. You can enhance the sense of community surrounding your setting by involving local people, local artists and the local community who may work together on projects, perhaps creating distinctive features in your grounds. Support, respect and reflect your local heritage by using local materials and locally-distinctive crafts and skills.

Global citizenship

The world for very small children is very much about themselves and their immediate providers / protectors, so how they are treated will affect their understanding of the world. Adults help by modelling respect for each other and for cultural differences. Include multi-cultural elements outdoors by growing and tasting food from other cultures, or creating artwork linked to different parts of the world.

“The purpose of sustainable development education is not to tell people what is important and what they should do, but to enable them to decide what is important to them, decide what they want to do about it, and equip them with the skills they need to do it.”

Learning For Our Future: Scotland's First Action Plan for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. August 2006

Building and grounds

Managing your building and grounds using a sustainable approach reflects how much you value and recognize your children's needs. It also improves the way the children feel about themselves, the people around them and their environment, and can also improve staff morale. This leads to a happier early years setting.

Sustainable design is about designing for minimum environmental impact. Soft surfacing the whole outdoor area is not the answer! Work with your environment – enhance rather than eliminate the natural aspects of outdoors. If you have only tarmac, add containers on top for growing, or for children's natural resource play. Carry out maintenance in a sustainable way with the use of chemicals reduced to a minimum.

Finding out more

The DfES website includes information on where sustainability fits into the Foundation stage/phase:

www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainable-schools

For information about Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship in Wales, visit www.esd-wales.org.uk

For information about Sustainable Development Education in Scotland, visit www.ltscotland.org.uk/sustainable-development

There is a list of suppliers relevant to sustainability on our website.

“This is not an option that will go away – sustainable development is the only way forward”

Rhodri Morgan,
First Minister for Wales, 2004

© This resource was originally created as part of the Early Years Outdoors membership scheme from the national school grounds charity

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