

THE ROLE of the adult

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

In an Early Years setting, the role of the adult is pivotal in shaping children's understanding of the world around them, particularly regarding environmental sustainability. Adults serve not only as educators but also as role models, demonstrating a passion for the environment that can inspire young learners. By integrating environmental education into daily activities, adults can cultivate a sense of responsibility and stewardship in children, encouraging them to become ambassadors for sustainability.



Passion and Inspiration

An adult's enthusiasm for the environment can be infectious. When educators actively engage in discussions about nature, recycling and conservation, they ignite curiosity in children. This passion can manifest through hands-on activities such as gardening, nature walks and recycling projects, allowing children to explore and connect with their surroundings. By creating a rich, interactive environment, adults can foster a love for nature and an understanding of the importance of protecting it. When discussing nature connection however, some adults may start to recognise they no longer feel connected to nature. Some adults working with children, therefore need to rekindle their own response system and awareness of nature. Being with children in nature, rather than teaching them about nature, is much more powerful and supports a genuine nature connection.

ACTION:

Choose a story that you love! The adult's infectious passion about a story will ignite young children to join you. Stories like *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter – the naughty little rabbit who steals into Mr McGregor's garden is a wonderful book to share during the autumn term



Knowledge of Nature



Practitioners may notice that enriching and developing their own knowledge of nature will deepen their shared interest with children. This is not so much a list of facts or names of trees, plants and animals (although this will undoubtedly help!) but developing a sense of the interconnectedness of nature and the role that each part plays. Any damage to one part of the eco system can have fundamental impact on others. From insects to earthworms – they all rely on the interconnectedness of nature to thrive and we are part of that system.

The Physical Environment



The physical environment of the setting plays a crucial role in this process. Classrooms and outdoor spaces should be designed to reflect sustainable practices, incorporating natural materials, plants and resources that promote exploration and discovery. By providing children with access to outdoor learning spaces, adults can encourage them to observe and interact with their environment, deepening their appreciation for the natural world.



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ACTION:

Bringing potted geraniums into the classroom when sharing Peter Rabbit is a great way to bring nature inside. Peter lives in a burrow under a fir tree, so build a burrow in the classroom from sheets and fabric and fill it with real leaves, conkers and pine cones. Children can then act out the story in the burrow.



The Emotional Environment



Equally important is the emotional environment within the setting. A supportive and nurturing atmosphere allows children to feel safe and valued, which is essential for their overall development. When adults create an emotionally positive environment, children are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings about the environment openly. This emotional security fosters a sense of belonging and encourages children to engage in discussions about sustainability, as they feel their opinions matter. Adults can further enhance this emotional environment by modelling empathy and respect for nature, reinforcing the idea that caring for the environment is a shared responsibility.

ACTION:

After sharing a story such as 'Somebody Crunched Colin', discuss with a small group of children about whether they eat crisps. What do they do with the wrapper? Whose responsibility is it to put the wrapper in the bin? Can it be recycled?

This can lead to conversations about litter in your setting garden or local area. Children love to take responsibility and having litter pickers on site and available to use and loan to families helps foster a collective responsibility for the local community.



Embracing Child Voice



Embracing the child's voice is crucial in this context. Adults should actively listen to children's ideas and concerns about the environment, validating their thoughts and feelings. This approach not only empowers children but also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. By involving children in decision-making processes related to sustainability initiatives within the setting, such as creating a recycling program or planning a community clean-up, adults can help them feel a sense of ownership and agency.



The adult's role in supporting children in an early years setting is multifaceted. Through passion, inspiration and a commitment to embracing child voice, adults can effectively nurture young learners' understanding of environmental sustainability, preparing and supporting them to be conscientious stewards of the planet.

ACTION:

Take a look at the UNCRC Rights of the Child. Article 12 says 'Every child has the right to have a say in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously.'



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