



A file photo of children during a food and water supply disruption exercise in 2024. Pre-schools can do more to encourage children to make environmentally friendly choices, such as using a reusable water bottle instead of a disposable one. At the same time, they should nurture the attitudes that sustain such behaviour for life. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Traditionally, environmental curricula in schools are teacher-driven, lecture-heavy and textbook-oriented. But the goal of early childhood sustainability education should not be to turn children into “climate experts”. Rather, it is to build awareness and encourage pro-environmental behaviour.

the pupils questions such as: What do you do with old clothes? Did you know there are stores that sell recycled clothes?

Even something as mundane as mealtime could be an opportunity to talk about how food choices impact the earth, while still keeping the focus on daily habits.

Some children can even be inspired to become advocates for the environment in their family. A parent once told me that her Kindergarten 1 daughter “reprimanded” her for leaving the car engine idling while they were waiting for an older sibling, citing the “poisonous gases” that were leaking into the air. Such episodes illustrate how children can be empowered outside the classroom.

FIND PARTNERS FOR THE JOURNEY

Beyond preschools, community partners help to amplify sustainability education for young children by giving them a glimpse into how sustainability is practised in real-world settings.

One heartening development in recent years is the rise of partnerships between preschools and the community. For example, two My First Skool centres recently collaborated with AtSunrice GlobalChef Academy to organise a culinary workshop for preschoolers and their families, using upcycled kitchen ingredients.

But education begins at home, which is why parents and caregivers have an outsized role to play. While it may be difficult to model a fully eco-friendly lifestyle, small habits – even something as simple as walking to school – can go a long way.

A pro-tip for families is to start small and keep it fun, as fun habits are easier to sustain. As a family, agree to do one action or habit that will have a positive impact on the environment. For example, try walking instead of taking private transport for short distances.

Keep doing it, and over time, it will become easier to make it part of your life. Most importantly, remember that everyone is always learning – preschoolers and adults alike.

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Are pre-schoolers too young to be taught about sustainability?

Start small, make it fun and keep at it.

Coreen Soh

It is the year 2050, and imagine if worst-case climate scenarios have come true. Face masks have become necessary to combat rampant air pollution. Noxious fumes poison the outside world, and the forests that once helped to absorb carbon dioxide are engulfed in wildfire. For about 45 days a year, temperatures soar to above 60 deg C in the hottest parts of the world, making it impossible to stay outside for more than six hours at a time.

Thankfully, this apocalyptic future is still a projection outlined by Paris climate accords negotiators Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac in their 2020 book *The Future We Choose*. But if emissions are not curbed, it could become reality for our children, who will be in the prime of their lives in 2050.

Educating children about sustainability may be a daunting task as they may not have the literacy skills or awareness to grasp complex topics. But crucially, starting early secures a longer runway to shape the attitudes and habits that will be vital in the climate fight.

The need is urgent. By 2050, Singapore’s average daily mean temperatures could rise by up to 2.2 deg C. Public health and food security – a vital issue for a nation that imports over 90 per cent of its food – will be impacted.

On occasions like Earth Day on April 22, it is worth reflecting on what can be done to strengthen sustainability education for the next generation. Parents and educators must do three things: start young, make it fun and work together.

GOOD HABITS START EARLY

In 2024, a study conducted by NTUC First Campus (NFC), one of Singapore’s largest preschool operators, found that

preschoolers have a good understanding of environmental issues. This awareness translates into green habits – but not always for ecocentric reasons.

For example, preschoolers may try not to waste food, but could be doing so out of adherence to authority or guilt rather than to protect the environment.

Some 250 preschoolers from My First Skool and Little Skool-House – both run by NFC – were surveyed in the study, the first of its kind in Singapore. It found that preschoolers scored well (above 80 per cent) for environmental awareness on topics like water conservation and rainforest protection. But they scored lower (70 per cent) in their ecological footprint, which measures the extent to which children identify themselves as practising green habits and their rationale for doing so.

There is a strong case to be made for early childhood sustainability education when it comes to bridging the gap between awareness and action. A 2023 study conducted in the US

on climate literacy in early childhood education noted that children aged four to six are particularly receptive to environmental education compared to older age groups and, when exposed, demonstrated improved environmental knowledge, attitudes and awareness.

When taught using age-appropriate methods, children also feel empowered to be part of the solution. This is more constructive than learning about environmental issues through one-way mediums like television programmes, which may create a sense of helplessness and anger.

The upshot is that preschools can do more to encourage children to make environmentally friendly choices, such as choosing to repair toys instead of discarding them or using a reusable water bottle instead of a disposable one. At the same time, they should nurture the attitudes that sustain such behaviour for life. But how exactly should they go about it?

LET CHILDREN TAKE THE LEAD

Traditionally, environmental curricula in schools are teacher-driven, lecture-heavy and textbook-oriented. But the goal of early childhood sustainability education should not be to turn children into “climate experts”. Rather, it is to build awareness and encourage pro-environmental behaviour.

This is where emergent learning – a teaching philosophy that allows a child’s natural curiosity and interests to drive learning – can come in. A study on interest development by education researchers from Griffith University in Australia has shown that when learning is driven by a child’s curiosity and natural interest in a topic, they become intrinsically motivated to explore, experiment and enjoy.

In NFC classrooms, teachers are encouraged to give children a voice and find “moments” within interactions to engage them on environment-related topics. If clothing is a topic of discussion for the day, teachers might ask