

Bringing Up an Eco-Child

Little Things Mothers - and Fathers - Can Do to Develop Environmental Awareness in Children

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Conserving water and energy, recycling the newspaper and soda cans, using mass transportation - we have all heard about these things and thought about them.

Our children, however, will not have the luxury of only **thinking** about these habits; they will have to have mastered them, because they will face - and hopefully solve - the issues we only read and talk about. ⁽¹⁾ The damage to the ozone layer, global warming, water pollution and acid rain are realities that our children will have to deal with.

We need to give our children the chance for saving their planet, and we can do that by showing them what they can do, by encouraging them - and, most importantly, giving them the sense that they **can** make a difference. Once children realize that they have a role to play - when they feel empowered - they will not only respond, but they will be eager to do their share in protecting the Earth. We should not let our children grow up feeling that the problems of the environment are too big, too difficult and too hopeless to deal with.

Raising environmental awareness in children can, of course, to a great extent, be done by teachers who are trained in ways to incorporate the environment in different areas of the curriculum. Children, the future decision-makers, need adequate scientific knowledge to prevent our planet from deteriorating further. ⁽²⁾

"Only
when the last fish is caught
the last river polluted
the last tree felled
will man realize
money is not edible"

(freely translated by this author from a Greenpeace poster in Helsinki)

However, training for environmental awareness can and should begin much earlier than grade school. For young children to develop real understanding of nature, it is essential that they develop **empathy** towards all living things, plants and animals alike. Only then will the scientific knowledge gained later in school be meaningful to them. And children do seem to possess an immense capacity for empathy ⁽³⁾, it only needs to be cultivated and reinforced.

Cultivation of that empathy needs to begin at home and in kindergarten. Children are born with a natural curiosity about the world around them, a sense of wonder that we adults must keep alive. Rachel Carson, the author of the now-classic Silent Spring (a chilling account of the devastating consequences of wanton use of pesticides and chemicals), has aptly said that for a child to keep his sense of wonder, "he/she needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him/her the joy of the world we live in"⁽⁴⁾. Many of us adults have perhaps lost that sense of wonder, but together with our children we can re-discover it.

Some of the most simple things we parents can do is to enjoy with our child the crisp and clear autumn air or the gentle sound of the spring raindrops tapping on the window. The sight of the first wild spring cyclamen or anemones during a drive to the mountains is a wonder that merits a stop and a closer inspection of these messengers of spring. There will be no need to pick them; they are best left where they are. That is where the passers-by will also be able to experience their beauty. In the city, we can take a walk in the park and examine the budding of the trees there, or stroll on the sea-side boulevard and enjoy the sharp freshness of the salty sea-spray. In many cities, there are also nurseries where house plants, trees herbs and other greenery can be admired by visitors. Children will be delighted to observe the many luxurious and exotic plants, and will be thrilled if given an opportunity to select a small plant, perhaps a culinary herb or a desert cactus, to take home and nurture.

Even in the city apartment, we can plant something in order for our children to observe the miracle of growth and life. Easily sprouting seeds - lentils, beans, tomato seeds - can be planted in paper cups or old flowerpots. Together with the child, we can speculate what will happen, and how long will it take before anything will show. When about 2-3 cm long, lentil and bean sprouts can be

chopped and added to sandwiches. If space is available, growing of tomatoes, parsley and mint in small tubs on the balcony, or even on the windowsill, will let the children experience, first-hand, the significance of nature for our daily needs.

Pets can play a significant role in the emotional and cognitive development of a child⁽⁵⁾. Taking care of a pet will also foster caring and compassion for all living things and increase the child's awareness of the needs of an animal. When selecting a pet, available space, time and financial resources of the family set some limits. a dog needs plenty of space, a healthy diet and frequent grooming, and, of course, walks. A turtle, on the other hand, will require much less space, will eat little and will make no noise. Having a pet at home is, however, not the only way to foster love for animals. We can visit a farm and let our children become familiar with the animals there. Observing new-born calves or kids is a memorable experience! Together with our children we can learn amazing facts about wildlife through the nature films that many TV-stations broadcast. There is, of course, the wildlife all around us that should not be neglected. Little things like the intricate patterns on the wings of the harlequin bug, the fascinating camouflage colors of the praying mantis, locusts and moths, and the chirping of the cicadas in the oleander bushes are nature at its best.

There are numerous little things we parents can do to foster the sense of conservation in our children. How often do we leave enough electricity to burn almost 180 Kg of coal.⁽⁶⁾ With our child, we can make an effort to turn off lights where they are not needed. We can authorize our child to

be the "energy patrol" whose task will be to check that all unnecessary lights are turned off. How much paper do we throw away! We can tell our child that to make paper trees must be cut down, and that it takes years for a tree to grow tall enough to be used for paper. We can all preserve trees by recycling our paper. If we collect all the paper (including cereal boxes and other packaging) we use in the home for one week, weigh it, and multiply the figure by 52, then by the number of population, we have an idea of how much paper is consumed in the country every year, and this only in the home. Americans use approximately 260Kg of paper per person every year! It takes a billion trees to make all that paper!⁽⁷⁾ Even if there is no organized recycling in the area, there are little things that will help. Simply making use of both sides of the paper saves some trees. Children will be perfectly happy using the back side of letters, memos, etc. for drawing and scribbling. We can discuss the idea of recycling with our children, and, to demonstrate how paper can be re-used, we can make recycled paper (see directions at the end). We can also get together with our friends and neighbors and try to organize community recycling projects,

When shopping, we should take our children along. When choosing detergents, we can discuss the problem the chemicals in the household cleaners cause for the environment. Together with the child we can read the label and select the items that are environment-friendly. When purchasing deodorants and other sprays, we should explain that some of the packaging of these products damages the ozone-layer which protects us. Today, many cosmetic products are available that have not been tested on laboratory animals. Children may have very

strong opinions about the issue if they are made aware of it.

How often do we think about the packaging of the products that we bring home weekly? Many items come in large, inviting packages that really are not necessary. Just look at the way many small toys are packaged: in large, colorful, shrink-wrapped boxes. Food stuffs such as cereals are also often packed in cartons nearly double the size needed. Looking at the products in the local supermarket, we can select those that use minimal packaging, and we can buy as much as possible in bulk. Also, many dry goods now come in boxes made of recycled paper. Thus we can do our small share of conservation by giving some time and thought to consider packaging. Children will quickly learn to spot recycled packaging, to look for bulk alternatives and to accept toys in simple packaging. Our children can also monitor the purchasing of foodstuff and other items that are plastic-wrapped. Plastic is a petroleum by-product and is not biodegradable. Although some progress has been made in creating bio-degradable plastics, most plastics will stay in the landfills for decades or pollute our air with their fumes if burnt. All these may seem little things, but collectively they amount to tons of either unnecessary waste that has to be gotten rid of, or ideally, to the saving of at least a few trees and a smaller bag of waste to be disposed of.

Of course we cannot yet rely on only using recycled materials or recycling everything we use, but we can make a difference. And more importantly, we can raise in our children an awareness of environment and that can make a difference. **Environmental awareness begins at home, with us, the parents.**