

Sustainability in the early years

Script

Part 1 – 5-7 mins

Show scrapbook, discuss the activities undertaken and what was learnt about sustainability.

Part 2

Sustainability means that a resource can be reused and is sustainable as it will likely not run out or have a negative effect on the planet. Sustainability can be thought of in many ways, however, when looking at sustainability of our environment this links to looking after our environment by reducing deforestation, the use of plastics, climate change and pollution (Greenpeace,2024).

Sustainability has become a key part of early years education as practitioners in early years settings are able to promote and embed sustainable thinking and principles into everyday life. This is important as these years are crucial for children to develop a positive attitude and understanding of sustainability (Davis, 2022). In Wales, these principles and values are driven by various legislation such as the Well-being of Future Generations Wales Act 2015. This is important as it ensures that organisations consider the long-term effects of their decisions on future generations and promotes sustainability (Welsh Government, 2015). However, there are limitations to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act being implemented and improving sustainability due to financial strain, lack of resources and a demand in services (Audit Wales,2025). Similarly, sustainability is also a key part of the curriculum for Wales and is taught across the curriculum in all subject areas. This is important as it supports children's understanding of worldwide problems and how they can positively create change (Welsh Government, 2022). Additionally, throughout the new curriculum children can gain knowledge on various types of sustainability issues, for example, in science they may learn about eco systems and how the behaviour of humans effects the planet. Whilst a focus on health and wellbeing may promote a sustainable lifestyle through a healthy diet and exercise. This is an important approach as it gives children broader knowledge and understanding of sustainability as a whole (Welsh Government, 2022). However, although sustainability is taught throughout the curriculum for Wales, there are limitations. As practitioners have more control and flexibility over curriculum planning, this can lead to inconsistencies to how sustainability is taught throughout Wales (Estyn,2025).

The experiences that were undertaken when completing the John Muir Award supports the themes and aspirations of Education for Sustainable Development through practical learning. Practical learning supports this by giving children the chance to engage with nature, explore and discover their surroundings. (John Muir Trust, 2025). When completing the John Muir Award the children and I experienced practical learning through a mini beast hunt, bird watching and educational visits to our local recycling centre. This links to the Experiential Learning Theory that suggests children gain a better understanding when they engage in hands on, purposeful learning experiences rather than being taught (Kolb, 1984). The John Muir Award supports this model as children also have the opportunity to look back and reflect on their experiences and share what they have discovered (John Muir Trust, 2025). Additionally, Dewey (1938) supports practical learning such as nature walks as he states that purposeful learning is achieved through hands on experiences. Moreover, creating hands on learning experiences with nature is important as Montessori (1967) suggests that exploring nature in the early years can boost children's independence, imagination and independence. Furthermore, Froebel (1887) emphasises the importance of practical outdoor learning experiences as learning is more purposeful through exploration rather than instruction. Children participating in engaging, purposeful activities such as planting, bird watching can also support children's overall holistic development (Bruce, 2021). However, practical learning in the outdoors is not always achievable and has limitations such as health and safety restrictions. Children may be at risk due to uneven surfaces, dangerous plants and animals and extreme weather, due to this it is important that practitioners carry out risks assessments to ensure safety and give children the opportunity for hands on learning experiences in nature (Bilton, 2024). Additionally, Frances et al (2024) states that financial strain in schools can affect children's access to practical outdoor experiences this is also supported by the Department for Education (2023) that suggests many schools do not have direct access to nature or outdoor spaces and may be unable to supply adequate clothing or resources. Furthermore, another limitation of practical learning about sustainability is access. Many children with additional learning needs or physical disabilities may be unable to access practical learning opportunities. Practitioners will need to differentiate activities and teaching to ensure children do not miss out on purposeful learning about sustainability (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2024).

The experiences that were undertaken when completing the John Muir Award also supports the themes and aspirations of Education for Sustainable Development through action taking. Action taking is an important part of Education for Sustainability as it develops learners to apply their knowledge and understanding through meaningful actions and solving real world problems. Education for Sustainability promotes children to use their knowledge and positive attitude for change and make important decisions. This is important as it allows children to take action that contributes to the protection of

the environment, wildlife and economic sustainability (UNESCO, 2020). When completing the John Meuir award there were many opportunities to take action and problem solve. After exploring the forest area, it became clear that litter and wildlife conservation were problems that required action. Therefore, action taking is important as it promotes critical thinking and problem solving through investigation and reflection (UNESCO, 2017). Theory supports this as Dewey (1938) suggests that children learn best from purposeful experiences and taking action rather than listening to instructions. Additionally, another benefit of taking action is that after taking part in activities for the John Meuir award such as litter picking, children are more likely to continue to show and develop sustainable behaviours for the rest of their lives (UNESCO, 2026). Furthermore, taking actions allows children to link what they have learnt in the classroom and apply this outdoors to solve real life issues (UNESCO, 2026). Piaget's (1952) constructivist theory supports this as it suggests that children learn best from their environment. However, similarly to practical learning, there are also limitations to taking action. Funding and budgets can be a limitation to taking action as activities that promote sustainability such as gardening require space, time, equipment and funding which is difficult for many schools and may reduce the impact of action taking (Elliott and Davis, 2020). Additionally, another limitation may be cultural differences as the sustainable habits and behaviours practiced in school may not be reinforced at home, they may also not have the access or resources (UNESCO, 2020). To conclude, although there are limitations, this does not take away from the value that taking action adds to the world and promoting sustainability.

The role of the adult is also important for education for sustainability as practitioners create learning environment that are inviting, engaging and purposeful for learners. In the early years practitioners are seen as role models promoting sustainability through real life experiences and through play (Davis and Elliott, 2021). Children are more likely to learn sustainable behaviours such as recycling and looking after the environment by watching and imitating the adults around them. This is supported by Bandura (1977) social learning theory which emphasises that children learn by observing and imitating the adults around them. In addition to this, the role of adults is important to promote children to play an active role in their education, making important decisions and being empowered to create change. This is supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states children's rights to be heard and be involved in decisions that affect them (United Nations, 1989). However, the effectiveness of the role of the adult can vary as there are challenges such as time constraints, lack of resources and training about sustainability (UNESCO, 2020). However, through correct scaffolding and planning the role of the adult can be effective for children to build on skills and knowledge required to live a sustainable life.

The John Muir award is a great tool for supporting sustainability in the early years as it creates an awareness of the environment and real-world problems (John Muir Trust,2025) The award also supports hands on experiential learning that believes learning is most effective when it is a hands-on experience that allows children to reflect and share what they have learnt (Kolb,1984). The award also supports children's wellbeing, self-belief and resilience as it provides chances to develop, grow and achieve by connecting with nature (John Muir trust,2025). The John Muir award is beneficial as it combines multiple educational philosophies including Froebel (1887) that views nature and the outdoors as a second teacher.

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