

With care

Exploring the natural environment is a great way to educate children about becoming eco-friendly, discovers *Nicole Weinstein* in the latest in her series on supporting and resourcing learning for aspects of 'Understanding the World'

Going on a nurdle hunt along the Scottish coast, counting up and weighing a week's worth of waste for a recycling project, and visiting local project 'Waste Busters' to find out ways to reduce landfill are just a few of the eco projects that children at Stramash Elgin in northeast Scotland have been involved in this year.

At this outdoor setting, where children have spent just one day in the past year indoors, the children have the opportunity to explore the 30 acres of woodland and paddocks owned by Stramash, a chain of three social enterprise nurseries. At the hub of the setting, there is a yurt, a parachute canopy, which is used for weather protection, a campfire pit for daily cooking and a pallet of camping toilets and nappy-changing facilities.

Team leader Alastair Davidson says, 'Energy-saving days, where we conserve electricity or put off the heating, are not really relevant for our setting. Instead, we are immersed in nature so we wear appropriate outdoor clothing and we learn about the environment by connecting with nature on a daily basis.'

CLIMATE CHANGE

One of the greatest challenges of our time is climate change, explains Mr Davidson, who before joining Stramash in 2016 worked as education and learning co-ordinator for Keep

Scotland Beautiful, part of Eco-Schools Scotland. He continues, 'Taking action on climate change requires an understanding of how the world works as well as a love and respect of the natural world. We can't expect our young people to do something about it if they don't care about it.'

At Stramash Elgin, children are actively involved in the management and care of the woods. The curriculum reflects the rhythm of life in the woods – they collect acorns in the autumn, plant them over the winter and protect the seedlings throughout the spring and summer. Over time, they become aware that to continue to enjoy being and playing in the woods, they have to look after them.

While exploring the environment together, the practitioners observe what inspires and delights them and from this develop their interests and learn with them. For example, upset with the dog poo at the drop-off point, the children decided to count how many they could find in this 1km stretch of the woodland. They counted 57 and put up a sign asking dog owners to dispose of their waste.

Mr Davidson says, 'Overall, our philosophy roughly follows the work of town planner and environmentalist Patrick Geddes who believed children should learn through Heart, Hand and Head. That is, delight and wonder; touch and feel; do and reflect, then put into practice.'

EVERYDAY TASKS

During snack time, the children sort waste into three categories: food waste, recycling and landfill. This leads to lots of discussion about the different types of waste and how to reduce it. During Waste Week, by EDF Energy initiative The POD (see More information), the children saved all the waste for a week and counted and weighed it. This included everything except nappies. Children came up with ideas of how



BOOKS

- *Michael Recycle* by Ellie Bethel
- *The Lorax* by Dr Seuss, alongside Keep Scotland Beautiful's *One Planet Picnic*, which encourages the nation to engage with and discover local producers: www.keepsotlandbeautiful.org/sustainable-development-education/food-and-the-environment/one-planet-picnic/design-a-pocket-garden
- *See Inside Recycling and Rubbish* by Alex Frith (Usborne, £9.99), available from www.earlyyearsresources.co.uk



to reduce waste, including eating all their lunch and snacks, and making things instead of buying them.

Mr Davidson says, 'We emptied it all out and looked at what could be used again. There were some common things like yogurt tubs, which we spoke to the children about and tried to come up with alternatives. We make compost from our food waste collected at snack and lunchtime – not meat or dairy products. Our bins are labelled with pictures. We call the stuff that can't be reused or recycled the "landfill" bin and there is a picture of a huge rubbish dump and lorry.'

The children also go on regular trips to Waste Busters (<http://moray-wastebusters.org>), a project next to a recycling centre in Moray, selling items that were destined for landfill. For the Christmas fayre, the children chose second-hand books and toys from Waste Busters.

'They understand about the energy that goes into making new toys – the electricity, power and craftsmanship – and why this is wasteful if the toys are thrown away,' explains Mr Davidson.

Another initiative that the children have been involved in is The Great Nurdle Hunt, where they collected a cupful of these small plastic pellets at a local beach. Nurdles are used by industry to make nearly all our plastic products, and unlike large marine litter, they are so small that they go largely unnoticed. However, scientists are becoming

**Above, right: at Stramash Elgin
Below: Worm World from Reflections on Learning**



Cosy's Composter and wormery





increasingly concerned about their effect on our marine ecosystem.

GOOD PRACTICE

It is important that practitioners support children to look after the environment in all settings, regardless of whether or not the setting is based outdoors. Many practitioners may not have grown up learning about the environment, spending time outdoors or being conscious of our use of resources, so it is important to develop these skills and knowledge.

Mr Davidson says, 'It's not just about teaching children why we should recycle or what the names of plants and trees are, it's a journey of discovery in partnership with the practitioner and child.'

Some tips to get started

- Consider the environmental cost of your actions or purchases – from children's resources to cleaning. For example, switch to Ecover cleaning products, Naty nappies and wipes or Kinder by Nature Wipes. Or change your lunch wrap (www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/sep/25/five-best-re-usable-sandwich-wrappers).
- Create a small garden, collect leaves to compost and, over time, children will see the cycle in action. To create compost, simply put leaves in black bin bags with small holes in the bottom and leave to decompose.

- Follow your children's interests in the environment no matter what that is – insects, mud or sticks – and think about how you could develop that interest into further learning opportunities and experiences. There are learning opportunities in everything: the weather, the seasons, the daily/weekly routines.
- Learn about your own community. Let the children map out your local area and name things – this will help give them meaning and create a relationship.
- Learn about any local dialects. Older folk could help here and talk about what the local environment used to be like.
- Visit your local recycling centre/landfill.
- Feed the birds.
- Sing songs and read stories about nature.
- Grow things. Cook and eat the things you've grown.
- Get some hens.
- Help clean up a local park.
- Share what you're doing with other early years settings, schools and community groups – perhaps you'll find things to do together.

THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL

There are many organisations – Eco-Schools, RSPB, Woodland Trust, EDF's The POD – which have resources to help practitioners introduce 'green' topics to children. They also often have examples of what other early years centres have done that can be helpful. Settings could also explore the recently launched United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and work on the ones that they agree are important locally as well as globally.

Mr Davidson says, 'At the end of the day, children understand the concept of fairness and they understand that our actions can have an impact on children across the globe. So this can be explored. For example, our pre-school children organised Den Day this year, in support of Save the Children. We cooked over a fire and used something called a Wonderbag to keep food warm or cold.

This was developed to help people in Africa reduce the amount of fuel and time needed to cook, so that young girls can go to school rather than spend all day collecting wood and cooking. We talked about the importance of shelter and natural disasters and extreme weather condi-

Cosy's Pound Shop Gardening Kit; Recycle It Wall Hanging by EYR; and Cosy's Composter



MORE INFORMATION

- www.stramash.org.uk/info/outdoor-nursery
- EDF's The Pod – Waste Week, <http://jointhepod.org/campaigns/campaign/47>
- RSPB, www.rspb.org.uk
- The Woodland Trust, www.woodlandtrust.org.uk
- Eco-Schools, www.eco-schools.org.uk. (Keep Britain Tidy is the Eco-Schools National Operator for England, where more than 18,000 schools are registered and 1,200 schools currently hold the internationally recognised Eco-Schools Green Flag.)

tions, and how climate change links into all of this?

- The Global Goals, www.globalgoals.org
- The World's Largest Lesson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBxN9E5f7pc>

RESOURCES

Reducing the amount of 'stuff' on offer is a good place to start when trying to become eco-friendly; however, there are some resources that aid children's discovery of the natural world – for example, binoculars, magnifying glasses, cameras and books.

Mr Davidson says, 'We've spent quite some time slowly decreasing the amount of "stuff" we use, particularly plastic. This has been a slow process, involving lots of coaching with children – giving them examples of how to play in the outdoors with what they find around them. We use sticks and grass to make paintbrushes and paint with mud and water. We use loose parts – sticks, stones, pinecones, pallets and cable drums. The children use their imaginations to create new worlds – and we're not introducing something new; we're reusing what was destined for the dump.'

Here are some useful resources:

Outdoors

- Composter and wormery, £31.99; Composter, £59.95; Pound Shop Gardening Kit (70 pots and 16 items), £28.99; Milk Bottle Holder Stand, £56.99 – all from www.cosydirect.com
- Educational Seed Collection, £8.49, from www.ypo.co.uk
- Mini Grab and Go Exploring Nature Outdoor Kit, £36.95 – www.tts-group.co.uk/mini-grab-and-go-exploring-nature-outdoor-kit/1006772.html
- Learn about the importance of worms in our ecosystem using Worm World, £12.99 – www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk/worm-world.html

Games and puzzles

- I Sort Out My Waste, £45.95; Duos: Environmentally Conscious Puzzles, £13.95; Recycle It Wall Hanging, £54.95 – all from www.earlyyearsresources.co.uk

Sustainability

- Eco House and Accessories, £91.25; Cardboard Toys – Car, £12.75 – both from www.ypo.co.uk
- Think about being energy-efficient using the Animal Character Wind Up Torches, £4.99 each, from www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk ■