

Plastic planet

The volume of plastic now littering the environment has provoked widespread realisation that our consumer habits need to change.

Meredith Jones Russell reports on the settings leading the way

Plastic waste is damaging our health. After decades of growing use, this durable, flexible, cheap material is found in everything from coffee cups to clothes to teabags. The way we now live means plastic is endemic in our environment. The consequences? The vast majority – 90 per cent – of seabirds have plastic in their stomachs, while microplastics are commonly found in fish, and tap water around the world has invisible plastic fibres in it: a direct threat to human health.

The mainstream media is waking up to the cause, with anti-plastic campaigns such as Sky's Ocean Rescue, while the Government has planned a consultation on charging for single-use plastic and committed to elimi-

nate plastic waste by 2042. With half of the plastic that exists being made in the past 13 years, however, campaigners have said this does not match the scale of the problem.

While there are currently no official restrictions on the use of plastic in early years settings, several are considering reducing their consumption, or even banning it altogether.

RESOURCES

The Pre-school Learning Alliance's environmental policy discourages the use of plastic toys over natural materials – the reason being more to do with practice than ideology.

Melanie Pilcher, quality and standards manager at the Alliance, says, 'Because plastic representations of things don't provide the same

We have recently become aware of the extent of the problem posed by plastic



sensory experience as the real thing, they have much less learning value.'

Hayley Room, co-founder of Dandelion Education in Norfolk, which does not use any plastic toys apart from balls, agrees. 'We believe strongly that the weight, colour and feel of natural materials provide a depth of experience and learning that plastic does not,' she says. 'A plastic car is a plastic car, but a piece of wood is an "open" toy; it can be a car or a doll or, indeed, anything you care to imagine. This use of natural materials and imagination covers vast swathes of development matters. A plastic toy cannot do this.'

However, Menna Godfrey, owner of Quackers Pre-School in York, says her nursery stops short of banning plastic resources completely. 'Rather than banning plastic for the sake of banning it and throwing the baby out with the bathwater, we look at recyclability above all,' she says. 'I wouldn't buy new plastic, but the most important thing is that the resource is open-ended.'

Ms Godfrey explains that small items such as bottle caps can hold a range of possibilities for children. 'They are a really flexible resource,' she says. 'There's the potential for stackability, putting holes through

CASE STUDY: TOPS

Tops Day Nurseries hit the headlines recently when the company decided to ban the use of glitter in all its 19 settings after learning that microplastics, from which it is made, cannot be recycled and are regularly ingested by sea creatures and other animals.

But Tops has not stopped at glitter. Managing director Cheryl Hadland says, 'We did a plastic audit of our nursery through observation and checking invoices. I noticed orders for 1,500 plastic toothbrushes every three months. We were changing the brushes before we needed to as we had a policy of three-monthly new brushes, but of course many children were part-time, some were away for a few weeks, and some started mid-term, so many brushes were only being used a handful of times before they were thrown away. This was a huge waste.'

To address this, Tops retrained all its staff

on when to replace toothbrushes and banned plastic toothbrushes in favour of bamboo ones instead.

Ms Hadland explains, 'Despite the bamboo brushes being more expensive, the change should be cost-neutral with the less frequent [replacements].'

She adds, 'Plastic Biros will be next on my hit list. I'd love to do everything at once, but we really can't!'





POLITICAL RESPONSE

- 2011** ● Wales introduces plastic bag levy; 76 per cent fewer bags used in first year
- 2013** ● Northern Ireland introduces plastic bag levy; 71 per cent fewer bags used in first year
- 2014** ● Scotland introduces plastic bag levy; 80 per cent fewer bags used in first year
- 2015** ● England introduces plastic bag levy; 83 per cent fewer bags used in first year
- 2017** ● UN resolution commits to stopping the flow of plastics into the ocean
 - Autumn Budget promises a consultation on how charges on single-use plastic items could reduce waste
- 2018** ● Scottish government launches consultation on banning plastic-stemmed cotton buds
 - EU launches plastics strategy to make every piece of packaging on the continent reusable or recyclable by 2030
 - Theresa May vows to eliminate UK's plastic waste by 2042
 - January: The UK ban on the manufacture of products with microbeads comes into force

Another barrier is the ubiquity of plastic, especially when it comes to food

‘We use washable nappies,’ she says, ‘but it would be so good to get companies on board to help settings, like getting biodegradable nappy disposal bags made more widely available. Dealing with disposal ramps up the price, and nurseries are naturally looking to cut costs.’

Another barrier is the ubiquity of plastic, especially when it comes to food. Dandelion Education’s co-founder, Emma Harwood, says while it is working to reduce use of plastic, ‘at present it is hard, or even impossible, to buy crumpets and some other products without plastic wrapping’.

Dandelion sends parents suggestion sheets for children’s lunches, including a plea not to send food in plastic packaging and photographs of the plastic waste resulting from lunch, accompanied by a fact sheet about ocean pollution. Ms Harwood says parents now send very little plastic packaging in with their children.

Ms King-Turner (see Case Study) acknowledges that an entirely plastic-free approach requires an upfront cost. ‘Of course it costs money to get reusable equipment, but stainless steel lasts forever, and doesn’t get scratched quickly like plastic,’ she says.

PRACTICE

Nicky Hirst, programme leader for early childhood studies at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), admits that a blanket ban on plastics in nurseries would be logistically

them for threading, and the colours are fantastic. If we didn’t use some recycled plastic, we would lose out on a lot of possibilities.

‘Yes, the plastic will end up in the same place, but if we can extend its life I don’t see any point in throwing away quality stuff with possibilities for use.’

BARRIERS

Cost can be a barrier to nurseries banning plastic. Despite grants to buy washable nappies available in certain local authority areas, Sylvia Roberts, owner of Little Earthworms in Brighton, says nappy sacks and nappies are probably the biggest plastic outgoing in the sector.

CASE STUDY: BEAUTIFUL MINDS, DUBAI

Bernadette King-Turner, owner of Beautiful Minds nurseries in Dubai, banned plastic in all four settings. This means plastic bags, cups, plates, cutlery and straws are replaced with stainless steel cups, bowls, spoons and ladles. Families are also asked to use waterproof reusable bags, stainless steel or glass water bottles and reusable containers. The children decorate their bags, which can be used to carry wet clothes home.

Ms King-Turner’s top tips for adopting a plastic-free approach:

1. Have a clear reason or motive for going plastic-free, such as the children’s future, or adopting a sustainable approach to consuming resources. When you feel emotionally about it then you will put your whole heart into the process.

2. Be curious – make sure you educate yourself properly. Finding out about things such as melamine and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) makes you reconsider what you let children put in their hands and mouths.

3. Consider your options: research what you can do, what other options are out there. Think twice about everything. Start by considering what natural resources you can use,



and financially challenging. ‘I don’t think it is something we can do as a statutory requirement, but we could make agreements on sustainable development goals,’ she says. ‘For PVI’s especially, which are businesses aiming towards Ofsted, it would be really wrong to go in and say “you must dump all plastics tomorrow”’

However, Ms Hirst does suggest that linking a sustainable approach clearly to the EYFS may encourage more settings to consider an eco-friendly stance. She has worked alongside Diane Boyd of LJMU’s School of Education to develop an EYFS-aligned sustainability toolkit (see More Information), which brings together various themes such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Eco-Schools England material to help practitioners plan sustainable activities, and sustainable development goals.

‘Above all these values should be embedded in practice,’ she says. ‘You need a form of leverage by explaining how this can help settings, not as an addition to the EYFS but as part of it. Reducing plastic can be used to demonstrate understanding the world, or

personal, social and emotional development, and to demonstrate reflective practice. It shouldn’t be about a ban but about encouraging alternatives, dialogue and conversation.’

Little Earthworms’ Ms Roberts agrees sharing ideas is key to a more environmentally sound sector. ‘We need to give ourselves credit for how far we’ve come in the past 10 years,’ she says. ‘The more we talk to each other and support each other, promote a sustainable approach to our parents and to other settings, the better. As a sector we need to keep continually developing and reflecting.’

Ms King-Turner highlights the responsibility those in the early years sector have for the future. ‘I go diving regularly, and seeing what’s happening to our planet in places like the Red Sea and the Great Barrier Reef makes me feel so responsible for the next generations,’ she says.

In *Blue Planet II*, the most-watched TV programme last year, tens of millions saw an albatross feed its young plastic, which will kill it. As David Attenborough said: ‘The future of humanity, and indeed all life on earth, now depends on us.’ ■



MORE INFORMATION

- <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/microsites/early-childhood-education-for-sustainability>
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1162864/nursery-group-bans-use-of-glitter-to-protect-environment>

FACTS AND FIGURES

- 300 million tonnes of plastic is produced worldwide every year.
- Just 9 per cent gets recycled; eight million tonnes ends up in the sea, while some is incinerated – emitting pollutants such as hydrogen chloride, dioxin and fine particulates harmful to health – and the rest goes to landfill.
- Half the plastic produced each year is single-use (straws, food packaging, bottles, etc).
- 20,000 single-use drinking bottles are sold every second across the world.
- 500 billion plastic bags are used every year across the world – yet we use a plastic bag on average for 12 minutes.
- Scientists predict that if we continue at present rates, by 2050 the ocean will contain more plastic by weight than fish.