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## Introduction

For the last 10 to 15 years phrases such as *global warming, greenhouse effect, sustainable living, carbon footprints* and *climate change*, have become part of our everyday conversations. We are not always sure what they mean but do know they are serious terms and that they refer to issues that affect individuals as well as the whole earth.

We are also aware that changes in our climate happen over long periods of time, as do any attempts we might make to influence those changes. We also have to work with uncertainty as it is not possible to be specific about consequences or predict their timescales. So, climate change is a challenge not only for us but for our children, their children and for generations to come.

This is why the Pre-school Learning Alliance believes that those who work with our youngest children are in an ideal position to contribute to the climate change agenda. All early years workers and volunteers recognise the importance of the first five years of life in establishing the attitudes and actions that children take with them through life. Where better then, to start to develop an understanding of the environment and changes in it, than in early years settings?

*My Favourite Colour is Green* aims to support practitioners to engage young children with issues about their own environment,

sustainable living and their ability to act to influence climate change. This engagement, empathy and respect will provide the foundation on which a wider understanding of sustainable development and climate change can develop as the children grow up. In this sense early years practitioners are truly acting locally and thinking globally.

Some might argue that the concepts of environmentalism, sustainable development and climate change are too complicated for children aged from birth to five years. The Alliance does not accept this line of argument but rather recognises that ideas and activities have to be introduced to children in a way that is appropriate to their own level of development. As with all early learning activities, practitioners must start from where their group of children are and invite them to lead the way on activities. This makes the journey relevant, creative and above all fun.

It is also important to remember that children come with mothers, fathers, carers and other adults attached. The issues of environmental awareness and climate change are ones around which the early years setting can be the driver for the development of a true learning community; providing opportunities for all adults involved with a setting to learn and act with the children.

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## Why climate change is an issue for early years practitioners

Early years practitioners are used to looking ahead. They know, instinctively, that their work supports the foundations on which young children will approach the rest of their lives, shapes their values and informs their relations with the wider world. As a result those who work or volunteer in early years settings are ideally suited to take a leading role in addressing the huge challenges presented by climate change. Helping our youngest children to understand, engage with and respond to these challenges is a great responsibility and early years workers are ideally placed to build these elements into their everyday activities. Through their positive engagement with young children, complicated concepts such as sustainability and environmental awareness can become second nature for future generations.

### **Climate change as an issue of children's rights**

Cliché it may be, but children are our future and the generation of children currently in their pre-school years face the increasing impacts of climate change. A starting point, for consideration of the importance of early years workers in the climate change agenda, can be the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people (aged 18 and under) a comprehensive set of rights. The general

principles that underpin the UNCRC include:

- the right to life, survival and development;
- the right to non-discrimination;
- respect for the views of children and to give consideration to a child's best interests; and
- the requirement to give primary consideration to the child's best interests in all matters affecting them.

Since being introduced in 1989, the UNCRC has been signed by 193 countries worldwide. The UK government signed the UNCRC in 1991 and it came into force in 1992.

The potential for climate change to affect these rights is demonstrated clearly by Save the Children in its November 2009 report *Feeling the Heat*.<sup>4</sup> The report notes the following key impacts on children of climate change:

- Diarrhoea, the killer of one million children every year, is set to increase by as much as 10% by 2020.
- Malnutrition, which today affects 178 million children and causes 3.2 million child deaths each year, will affect 25 million more children by 2050.
- Malaria, responsible for one million child deaths per year, will affect up to 320 million more people by 2080.

<sup>4</sup> *Feeling The Heat: Child Survival In A Changing Climate* (2009) Save The Children

### *Ofsted Early Years Self Evaluation Form*

As part of the Ofsted framework to inspect delivery of the EYFS and evaluate how the ECM five outcomes are met, settings are encouraged to complete the Early Years Self-evaluation Form (EYSEF). Completion of this document is a worthwhile exercise as it requires practitioners to explain the impact of what the setting does on children's learning, development and welfare. All too often settings provide a list of all they do rather than reflecting on the outcomes for children arising from the activities. Using an environmental project as a starting point is often a good route in to consideration of how the setting used the children's input and feedback to plan the work, how the children's learning was observed and assessed and how parents and carers were actively encouraged to take part in the life of the setting.

There is little doubt that the EYSEF is a challenging development for practitioners, who are now asked to evaluate themselves rather than just waiting for Ofsted to come and judge them. Creative environmental activities provide a hook on which this evaluation can take place.

### *Environmental policies*

Increasingly settings are being asked to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through the publication of an environmental policy. This is often a requirement of funding applications that are made to public bodies or as part of lease agreements. These are challenging

documents to write, as practitioners are often unsure how to turn what they know they do in their setting into a series of statements on paper. By way of example, a copy of the Alliance's own Environmental Policy is included as Appendix 1. Whilst this policy will not be directly relevant to individual settings it is offered as a suggestion of the content of such policies and has been commended on a number of occasions by external bodies.

Clearly, the motivation for settings to introduce environmentally friendly activities and climate change projects into their practice is not to demonstrate how good they are at meeting the EYFS requirements or to just make a nice display for when the Ofsted inspector calls. However, it would also be unwise to miss the obvious benefits that such activities can contribute to the wider demands that regulation and legislation places on today's early years sector.

Furthermore as Jo Butcher, Assistant Director for Health, Wellbeing and Environment at the National Children's Bureau says, "Climate change isn't just a green issue, it is fundamental to achieving a range of educational, environmental, health and social outcomes."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Under 5 magazine (September 2009) Pre-school Learning Alliance

## Theme 1: The setting and its environment

### Planting Indoors and Outdoors

#### Northend Children's Centre, Slade Green, Kent

Many of the families who attend Northend Children's Centre come from disadvantaged backgrounds, often living in high-rise blocks of flats where the children do not have regular access to outdoor play spaces.

For Josie Lait (Centre Manager), and her staff team, this reinforced the importance of the outdoor environment that the nursery provides and the enrichment of outdoor areas is a high priority. When the nursery opened in 2006 each of the gardens consisted of an empty space with soft safety flooring, surrounded by a high plain brick wall. Over time they made many changes to try and make the garden areas more interesting and stimulating for the children. The team also felt that it was important to provide opportunities for the children to experience planting, including growing shrubs, flowers, and vegetables, as this was not something that many of the children were able to experience at home. Josie takes up the story:

"One of the major challenges that we faced here was that the nursery was built within an area of toxicity, on a disused landfill site; there were no natural floor surfaces (grassy areas) and digging into the ground was not allowed. Therefore we had no areas for planting and growing, which was something that we felt was very important. We decided that the easiest way in which we would be able to rectify this was to grow plants in containers and pots within each garden. During the spring term we applied for a local authority Capital Funding Grant to purchase some new gardening equipment for use in the indoor and outdoor spaces to enable us to begin our first major growing project.

"We were able to obtain several large wooden planters and troughs for the baby and toddler rooms and two large planting beds for the pre-school garden, as well as several packets of seeds to grow an assortment of different vegetables.

"As our resources were limited we wrote to parents explaining what we were trying to achieve and put up posters across the nursery asking for donations of any unwanted plant pots, bulbs and seeds. We had lots of positive feedback from the parents on how much their children had enjoyed looking after the bulbs and how lovely they looked once they flowered. The pre-school children were also able to start their own herb garden using the off-cuts they had been given and these herbs were then used by our cook for the nursery meals.

"The children within the toddler room were especially interested in all of the materials that had been gathered to begin the project and showed real enthusiasm when we began to pot

continued

up some of the seeds. Using child-sized gardening equipment the toddlers planted runner beans and tomato seeds into small pots which they kept in their room by the window. The children also had great fun getting messy and using the trowels to fill up the troughs and planters with compost ready for our seedlings when they were big enough. We had some carrot and spring onion seeds which the children sprinkled into the two troughs and covered up with compost.

“The children quickly learnt how to hold the watering can under the tap in order to fill it up and were very considerate in taking turns when there were more children than watering cans. The staff explained to the children that the plants needed the water to grow just like they did and that if they kept watering the plants they would soon be able to see them coming up through the compost.

“Over the summer the children were very interested in the plants and took great pride in them as they grew. They would regularly take magnifying glasses and viewfinders into the garden and look for insects or snails amongst the plants. By the end of the summer the children’s constant care and attention had resulted in all of their vegetables growing to some extent. Our nursery cook then prepared and cooked the carrots and runner beans and served them to the children with their dinner. The children all helped themselves to the vegetables and several children who were normally very reluctant to eat vegetables tasted the ones that they had grown themselves. All of the children ate either most or all of their carrots and runner beans which was a real success! Most of the children were able to understand and make the connection that what they had grown and picked in the garden was now what they were eating at the dinner table.”