

Raising Eco-Conscious Kids

“We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”

There is no better time like the present to begin teaching our children about the conservation and preservation of our home and all its precious resources. In a society so focused on consumerism, with billion dollar marketing campaigns aimed directly at our children, this may seem like a daunting task. These days, so much seems to be taken for granted. Children, especially, may never stop to think about where the “stuff” of their lives comes from, or where it will go when they’re through with it. Earth Day is a great day to get children involved in recycling and clean up activities, but just as it takes many lessons over many years to foster the qualities we hope to instill in our children, raising eco-conscious kids takes time.

The three basic principles of environmentalism, “reduce, reuse, and recycle”, provide a great structure for teaching children how to be “green”. To begin, a discussion of the terms “resources” and “waste” will prepare kids for understanding the need for these activities (reducing, reusing, and recycling). For younger children, basic associations between an object or food item and its source will suffice (i.e.; carrots from seeds in the ground, paper and wood furniture from trees, clothing from sheep or cotton). Older children will understand that everything is derived from some type of natural resource provided by our planet that is either renewable or non-renewable. Of course, children of all ages will understand the idea of waste. Some suggestions for illustrating the concepts of resources and waste are: a trip to the library to look for books on these topics; a trip to the local waste collection facility, pointing out the natural resources that exist in your surroundings, hands on activities like making paper and growing a vegetable, and talking about the sources of various items around the house.

Following are suggested activities for getting children actively engaged in reducing, reusing, and recycling. Again, a solid understanding of how resources and waste relate to everything we come into contact with on a daily basis will highlight the significance of these activities. Of course, there is a cyclical nature to these three concepts, and many of the activities relate to more than one of them.

1. Reduce

The main point here is that we want to reduce not only the waste that we produce, but also our use of resources. Replacing common, disposable items around the house with more permanent alternatives is a great place to start. Kids can participate by picking out their own cloth napkins, reusable water bottles, canvas grocery bags (that they can decorate), etc. Make it a challenge in the family to find more disposable items that can be replaced, thereby cutting down on waste and use of resources. In addition, teach children techniques for reducing their use of water and electricity.

2. Reuse

In addition to reusing new, permanent versions of household items which are often disposable, involve children in alternative methods of disposing of unwanted items other than throwing them out. Some ideas include: having a garage sale, making donations, and selling items back to resale stores. We also want to challenge children to discover new uses for items around the house that would otherwise end up in the trash. For example; old towels can be cut up and used for cleaning, grocery bags can be used to hold trash or to transport things when out and about, glass and plastic food containers can be used to hold and store other items, and who knows what children can come up with for a “recycled” art project! Starting a box garden and compost project is an excellent way to reuse food garbage that will provide endless opportunities for learning in the natural sciences.

3. Recycle

Children are probably the most familiar with this concept. If recycling is not already a routine activity in your home, it should be. If your city doesn't pick up recyclable materials, you can purchase containers for separating them out of your trash so they can be sold at a collection center in your neighborhood. Children can help with the collecting, sorting, and counting of these materials. In addition, teach children to question things around the house that aren't typical recyclable items, and think together about what can be done with them (toys, clothes, plastic food storage bags, shipping boxes, wrapping paper, etc.). Children might not be aware that so many more items aside from plastic, glass, and aluminum containers are recyclable. Have kids research products made from recycled materials, by looking in the library or on the internet for information. A lesson in percentages would make a good accompaniment to explaining the idea of “post consumer waste” to older children. They can then look for these percentages on packaging and goods made from recycled materials.

The goal of these activities is to help create a mindset among our children that has them looking at things in a new light, and asking themselves questions like, “Do I really need this item or product, or do I have something around the house I can use? Do I need to buy this item new, or would something gently used suffice?” and “What else can I do with this item rather than throw it out?” Of course, we all know now that the old saying “Do as I say and not as I do,” is quite erroneous when it comes to teaching children how we wish for them to behave. Our own modeling of these activities and behaviors is the best thing we can do to help them develop habits of conservation and preservation. In addition to developing an eco-conscious mindset, involving children in the activities above will promote critical thinking skills, and foster their creativity as they search for new and innovative ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle.