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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN PRESCHOOL AGE AS AN EDUCATIONAL PRIORITY

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Preschool age is one of the most sensitive and important periods for the formation of a person's relationship with the world. It is then that a child first begins not only to get to know the environment, but also to understand his place in it. Therefore, environmental education at this stage cannot be perceived as a narrow topic about waste sorting or individual cleaning campaigns. Preschool environmental education is extremely important because a positive attitude towards nature is formed in childhood. Young children more easily acquire values and habits, therefore the development of ecological awareness already in preschool age makes sense. Children who learn to care for the environment (e.g., through waste disposal, water or energy conservation) will carry these habits into adulthood, reducing potential environmental damage in the future. Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE) is increasingly being included in preschool programs, emphasizing its important role in raising environmentally conscious and sustainably behaving generations from an early age (Lepičnik Vodopivec & Šindić, 2025). Thus, environmental education at an early age not only helps to develop environmental awareness but also promotes skills and attitudes that can determine a sustainable and responsible lifestyle in the future (Lamanauskas, 2023).

Environmental education at this stage of education is the beginning of forming a responsible relationship with nature, life, resources, and man himself. This primarily means not only introducing children to nature, ecology, or a sustainable lifestyle, but also responsible behavior through various daily activities, observation, play, and personal experience. It is also important to understand that early environmental education is not only the transfer of knowledge, but also the development of values. During early childhood education, a person's attitude towards nature is formed, which is related to the internalization of values (Aramavičiūtė, 2002). Children learn not only to recognize plants or understand why it is necessary to save water. They learn to feel a connection to nature, develop responsibility, empathy, awareness, and realize that human actions have consequences. And those consequences can be various, and most often negative. Teacher practitioners note that it is important not only to convey knowledge about nature/environment, but also to create conditions for children to explore, experiment, and observe the processes taking place in the environment themselves (Lavickienė, 2026). Even more significant is to form children's understanding that caring for the environment is not an imposed rule, but a natural part of a responsible life. The activities already mentioned undoubtedly help to form sustainable habits, ecological awareness, a sense of responsibility, and even critical thinking. It is precisely the activities of the environmental context that not only promote the formation of children's ecological worldview but also help consolidate values related to the protection of nature and responsible behavior (Sawitri, 2017).

Another equally important aspect is the realization that a child does not learn about environmental protection from theoretical definitions, explanations, and concepts. Children learn through practical activities. Researchers have found that children learn about environmental protection more effectively through practical activities (Hansen & Sandberg,

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2020). Particularly outstanding are play-based and inquiry-based learning strategies that involve simple experiments and model building, which allow children to better understand complex environmental aspects, such as energy consumption and water conservation, in a practical way. Such activities encourage children to engage and reflect on their daily sustainability habits, making learning more accessible and interesting (Geduld & Majola, 2025; Souza et al., 2025). Again, practicing teachers note that environmental education should respond to children's natural curiosity, involve them in active exploration of the environment, encouraging a deeper understanding of environmental objects, phenomena, and their interrelationships, and discover various ways of knowing and learning (Navickienė & Obrikienė, 2026). Children should not only hear about nature, but also observe, touch, grow, explore, and protect it. Only then does education become alive, inclusive, and long-lasting. A child who plants a plant, sorts waste, or conducts research in nature understands the meaning of environmental protection much more deeply than one who is only told about it.

The third aspect that is worth emphasizing is episodicity. Environmental education can be effective and efficient when it is not only episodic (episodic activity). First of all, because children's awareness and behavior change not after one topic or one organized event, but when environmental principles are consistently integrated into everyday life. This forms adequate and meaningful habits, for example, turning off the tap, collecting garbage, sorting waste, using resources more economically, etc. A culture of habits is gradually formed.

The fourth aspect is no less meaningful. A preschool institution is not able to independently provide comprehensive education in the field of environmental protection. First of all, because a child learns by observing the behavior of adults, therefore, the example of parents, the habits of the home environment, and the general attitude towards nature have a significant influence. Various studies confirm that children learn by observing and imitating adult behavior (Deguchi et al., 1988; Hardecker & Tomasello, 2017; Paulauskaitė et al., 2026). Often, fundamental contradictions arise here between what the preschool institution declares and how the aforementioned principles operate at home. Thus, environmental education will not be effective if it is not a joint agreement between the kindergarten and the family.

The fifth aspect, the difficulties/limitations in organizing and implementing the environmental education process on the one hand, and the competencies of preschool teachers, on the other. It is obvious that not everything depends solely on the teacher's desire/efforts or family awareness. Very specific structural obstacles often exist. These may include a lack of resources, limited access to suitable educational spaces, restrictions in the urban environment, lack of funds for field trips, a large number of children in groups, lack of time, as well as the need for methodological assistance and professional development. Another problematic area related to this is the training (preparation) of preservice preschool teachers for environmental education. One of the latest studies has shown that although preservice teachers are aware of the importance of environmental education at an early age, their professional preparation in this area is not yet sufficiently consistent and systematic (Lamanauskas & Malinauskienė, 2025). This suggests that teacher training programmes need a more focused integration of environmental education, greater attention to experiential learning, practical methods, and analysis of real educational situations. It is recommended that teacher training programs be improved by incorporating innovative teaching methodologies and activities to strengthen students' environmental literacy (Dolenc Orbanić & Kovač, 2021). For example, studies show that after an environmental education course, the pro-environmental behaviour of preservice teachers improved, which indicates that not only words are important, but also the authentic learning process and the example that teachers themselves demonstrate (Bibi et al., 2026).

So, environmental education should not turn into just a declarative pose. After all, we often talk to children about sustainability, but we often act the opposite ourselves. Or we excessively admire the use of "secondary raw materials", while the quality of the educational activity itself

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suffers significantly. We should not forget that children sensitively record not only what we say, but also how we behave. True environmental education begins not with catchy slogans, but with a consistent, authentic example. If an educational institution lives by its declared values, children naturally accept them. Research also reveals that teachers who themselves understand and value the importance of environmental education can more effectively transmit these values to students. Teachers' attitudes and involvement in environmental education are essential factors in promoting children's environmental awareness and responsibility. This shows that education should not only be theoretical but also grounded in real-world examples and practical activities that encourage students to engage and develop empathy for nature (Imran & Almusharraf, 2024; Yeşilyurt et al., 2020).

Today's environmental education is much broader than just the usual knowledge of nature. It is not only about knowing plants, animals, or observing the seasons, etc. It is also about sustainable consumption, not wasting food, saving water and electricity, reducing air pollution, developing renewable energy sources, and finally, community spirit and even a healthy lifestyle. Environmental education in preschool age becomes (must become) a holistic approach to life. The child learns not only about nature but also about being responsible in the world. Environmental education in preschool should be understood as a holistic approach to life, encompassing not only environmental knowledge but also social, economic, and ecological aspects. Research shows that preschool teachers often initially understand sustainability only from an environmental perspective, but as they become involved in educational projects, they begin to integrate the dimensions of social sustainability, linking local challenges with global ones (Borg & Gericke, 2021).

Therefore, today it is worth talking not about whether environmental education is necessary at the preschool stage. It is much more important to ask whether we are giving it enough attention, quality conditions, and real non-declarative educational content. If we want the person of the future to be responsible for the environment, we must start from the very beginning - from kindergarten, from a daily example, from small but consistent actions that become the basis for a child's perception of the world. This leads to the need for deeper and more detailed research on this issue. Such research in the field of environmental education in preschool should primarily be directed at assessing the long-term effectiveness of experiential and inquiry-based learning, in order to determine which specific practical activities are most likely to form sustainable habits and promote value internalization. Also critically important are studies that analyze the mechanisms of family-kindergarten interaction/cooperation and educational interventions that reduce contradictions between declared values and everyday behaviour, since children learn primarily by imitating adults. In addition, systematic studies of future preschool teacher training programmes are needed, revealing gaps in competencies and modeling ways to integrate environmental education into professional training not episodically, but consistently and systematically.

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