



# Looking at Earth Day from a new angle

A simpler, more local approach to teaching environmental issues can have a bigger impact than you might think

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**T**he climate crisis and sustainability are not new concepts, but it still feels as if we're only taking baby steps towards solutions and change. The curriculum and the school day continue on pretty much the same as they have for years, usually with only minor suggestions of teaching this crucial subject.

Could it be that events such as Earth Day have been around for so long we've lost the spark for environmental action? Is it that we try each year to make it exciting and have run out of steam? Or are teachers so overwhelmed with curriculum demands that Earth Day feels like something extra to consider and resource? Often then, teachers will head online to find the easiest, quickest, or most 'exciting' activity to tick the box, which, unfortunately, sometimes relies on plastic-based resources, creating extra waste.

Should we always look for new and exciting ways to do things though? What if we step back and think about what is on our doorstep? Because often, that's where sustainability begins: our community is an exciting and meaningful place to take action.

So, instead of chasing the new, let's reconsider some tried-and-tested teaching successes.

## Follow children's interests

Those who teach in the Early Years sector will be fully aware of following children's lines of enquiry and using their interests as a starting point for planning. However, as soon as children leave

the foundation stage, almost everything they learn comes from their teachers, driven by what is required to meet curriculum objectives.

As a teacher you can spark an idea and create interest, but taking a step back and listening to your class is a powerful tool. What questions are they asking? What is it they truly want to know? And what are their ideas on how to get there? Of course, this will need action and shaping from you, for example visiting a local farm or farm shop, or visiting a local recycling centre, but the engagement and outcomes will be far more meaningful and likely to stay with the children longer.

## Consider the outcome

Standalone lessons are fine, but what do your pupils really get from them when there is no process or tangible outcome and emotion attached to their actions?

I've never not seen children excited about growing their own food and being able to pick and eat it. Knowing it's something *they* have done evokes pride and satisfaction. Community projects like tree planting and beach cleaning can have the same results, where children can feel truly proud and know they have made a first-hand

difference. Maybe your pupils could work together to design and build a water butt for their school, or community, thinking carefully about why it's needed. Or they could collaborate to add more flowers to their community or school, learning about the benefits of various plants, what habitat they might bring. Can they find ways to reduce the amount of plastic they use when gardening? Perhaps your school could organise a 'no plastics' week, too, where children who bring in lunch or snacks are encouraged to use recycled or reused containers.

## Use stories

One of the most significant ways to teach children is, and always has been, to use age-appropriate quality texts. Sharing books such as *Dear Earth*, by Isabel Otter, will undoubtedly lead to a wealth of ideas, interests, and avenues to pursue.

Although these three ideas are not new, they can create excitement. Why reinvent the wheel when the truest opportunities for change – and the ones that will make the most difference – are often the simplest? Classroom-based learning has its place for our children and some subjects, but being a part of the world, the community, and the solution is much more exciting. So as Earth Day approaches this year, consider what it really means: is it another chance to tick a box, or should it be the catalyst for prolonged change and a shift in mindset? **TP**

*Dr Thomas Bernard is co-founder of children's publishing company QuestFriendz and co-author of the SuperQuesters series. SuperQuesters: The Case of the Angry Sea covers environmental themes including recycling and water pollution and is publishing 14 March 2024.*

