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Ecological Education for a Sustainable Future in Swedish Kindergartens

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world, developing ecological awareness in children is crucial for ensuring a sustainable future. Sweden stands out as a leader in environmental protection and sustainable development, which is reflected in its educational policies and everyday practices. The Swedish preschool curriculum integrates ecology and sustainability as fundamental aspects of upbringing and education, and Swedish programs in kindergartens focus on learning about recycling, energy conservation, and understanding natural cycles. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of children's autonomy and active participation in decision-making on issues that affect the environment. Research highlights the importance of continuing professional development for educators in order to successfully integrate all aspects of sustainability into educational work. It also presents practical examples show how children can adopt sustainability values in a fun and engaging way.

SWEDISH PRESCHOOL CURRICULA AND ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The Swedish preschool curriculum from 1998 (Lpfö 98) introduced ecological awareness and sustainability as fundamental values, with the aim of developing children's responsibility towards nature. The curriculum encourages environmental protection and everyday practices that contribute to a sustainable future. In the 2010 and 2018 versions, the emphasis on sustainability was further strengthened by introducing concrete activities such as recycling, energy saving, and education about natural processes. Sweden views education for sustainability as a key response to global challenges, including climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Education, especially in early childhood, is recognized as an important tool in shaping a sustainable future. The curriculum emphasizes children's autonomy, active participation, and transformative learning, recognizing children as capable and engaged participants in social change. Sustainability is integrated through ecological, social, and economic dimensions, with an emphasis on a holistic approach and learning through experience. As one of the global sustainable development goals, quality education plays a crucial role in empowering children for responsible action. The traditional Swedish practice, based on daily time spent in nature and caring for living beings, further supports the development of children's understanding of natural relationships and the consequences of human choices.

ALTERNATIVE PRESCHOOLS IN SWEDEN

In the modern context of increased technology use and reduced physical activity, regular time spent in nature is recognized as crucial for the development of ecological awareness, empathy, prosocial skills, and cognitive abilities in children. Forest kindergartens in Sweden, known as "Skogen Förskola," are based on the idea that nature is the best teacher. This approach, developed in the 1950s through the concept of "rain or shine" schools ("I Ur och Skur"), encourages children's daily presence in nature to foster physical, social, and ecological skills. The first official forest school was established in 1982, and today there are more than a thousand such schools in Sweden. Forest preschools do not have uniform design standards but are adapted to local conditions, emphasizing learning through play and practical activities that promote connection with nature, physical activity, and creativity. An example of such a preschool is the one in Högdalen, Stockholm, where, through ecological practices and cooperation with the local community, children are provided with rich outdoor learning experiences, encouraging sustainability and natural curiosity.



A FUN WAY TO TEACH CHILDREN ECOLOGY IN SWEDISH PRESCHOOLS

In Swedish preschools, ecology is introduced to children in a fun and simple way, encouraging their natural curiosity. The story of Kaj the shark, who encounters trash in the ocean, is used to develop ecological awareness. The children got strongly connected with the story, became motivated, and spontaneously wanted to clean up the environment. By going to the beach, they collected litter and discussed the importance of preserving nature. The activity allowed the children to connect the story with real-life experience and become aware of their impact on the environment. A plant-growing project with the youngest children aims to show them how their actions can influence the environment and sustainable development. Children were given the opportunity to explore the entire plant growth cycle through hands-on activities with the support of educators. It is important to allow children to explore through their senses and play and to provide them sufficient time to ask questions. Educators had to use various methods to involve as many children as possible, even though leading the group was challenging due to the large number of children. The children showed great interest and wanted to continue planting even after the activity ended.



CONCLUSION

Sweden represents an inspiring model how to integrate environmental education into the preschool system. Their curriculum not only emphasizes the importance of ecology, but also offers concrete strategies for involving children in sustainable practices. Environmental education in Swedish preschools is a key element in developing environmentally aware and responsible future generations. The Swedish model of preschool education is based on the active participation of children in learning, encouraging the development of critical thinking about ecological topics through play and everyday activities. This approach builds fundamental ecological competencies and promotes the development of social responsibility. Research indicates the need to change educational practices in order to systematically integrate the values of sustainable development at all levels of education.



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