

School children could lead the way on sustainability

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Many children are not only passionate about environmental issues, but more than capable of driving forward sustainability initiatives, argues new research into the role of schools in developing more sustainable communities. Children already play a key role in becoming more sustainable by encouraging changes in behaviour of those around them whether in terms of recycling, saving energy, growing vegetables and healthy eating etc.

But, argues researcher Dr Barry Percy-Smith, these changes alone are not enough; we need to encourage learning and change across whole communities. Children are well placed and also keen to take on wider roles and responsibilities as active (rather than passive) citizens in improving their communities - for example, as activists in community based projects and campaigns, as community researchers, and as ambassadors of change in other schools and in community groups.

Some of the children in this study, for example, engaged in projects to encourage more sustainable approaches to [food consumption](#) involving community research into shopping habits, publishing a booklet about local opportunities for buying sustainable food, and lobbying supermarkets to decrease packaging and increase the stock of local produce. In another school, [young people](#) organised a No/Low Energy day in the school to explore what might be possible in reducing energy consumption.

"With their dynamism, energy and new ideas children demonstrate

considerable potential as agents of change," says Dr Percy-Smith. "But as a society we neither encourage nor harness that energy and creativity. We have too little respect for the abilities of children and too many people feel that children either can't or shouldn't take a lead on change. Many children are very keen to use their learning to educate others about sustainability. We have to create opportunities where children and young people can contribute to development within their community. "

At present, the Government's Sustainable Schools Strategy (2006) sets out an agenda which, among other goals, aims to mainstream Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into the school curriculum by 2020. If those Government goals are to be achieved and if learning is to spill over into successful lifestyle change in homes and communities, several significant changes must occur, Dr Percy-Smith suggests.

First, children need both the right conditions and appropriate support to take on a more significant role as agents of change. These include adopting different approaches to learning in schools - approaches which focus on 'doing' rather than just 'knowing' and which activate children's creativity, critical thinking, problem solving skills and develop competences for action. "Much of this can involve learning outside of the classroom, but schools need the space, time, training and resources in order to provide these different learning approaches," Dr Percy-Smith insists.

Second, Education for Sustainable Development needs to be made a priority for schools. This means adopting 'whole school approaches' whereby all school staff are involved in the sustainable development agenda, ESD is integrated across the curriculum, children can plan their own learning activities and sustainable practices are adopted in all aspects of the school. Researchers further envisage a new extended role for schools that goes beyond simply educating children so they function as 'sustainable community learning centres' for adults as well as children

and as catalysts in terms of leading, initiating and supporting sustainable community activities beyond the class room.

Finally, researchers call for initiatives that will challenge current negative views expressed by the media and held by some sections of society about Britain's young people. "Too often school children are seen as a problem, if not something to be feared," Dr Percy-Smith points out. "Too few people respect our [children](#) and understand the potential of young people who, given the right structures and support, can play a significant role in making our communities more sustainable."

The ESRC will return to the issue of young people attitudes to climate change as apart of the longitudinal study, Understanding Society. For the first time thousands of young people will be surveyed about their attitudes offering a new insight into this group.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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