

TOY-FREE
MONTH



Co-funded by
the European Union

Sustainable play



GUIDE TO A TOY-FREE MONTH

Information about the guide

Title: Sustainable Play: A Guide to a Toy-Free Month

Editors: Jerneja Šibilja and Konstantina Tsafitsa

Authors: Danuta Łukasińska, Konstantina Tsafitsa, Jerneja Šibilja, Mojca Krajšek, Irena Cesar, Gašper Žagar, Elvira Lhotka

Proofreading: Sonja Špegel

Creative direction: Aleksandra Simla



The guide was developed in the scope of the Erasmus+ project Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners.

2024-2-PL01-KA210-SCH-000294718

Project partners:



VRTEC DOBRNA



Innovation
Footprint



Supporting partner:



Co-funded by
the European Union



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



COBISS ID: 254314499

Katalogni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID 254314499

ISBN 978-961-97145-1-5 (PDF)

Publisher: STEP Institute (Rimska cesta 6, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Year: 2025

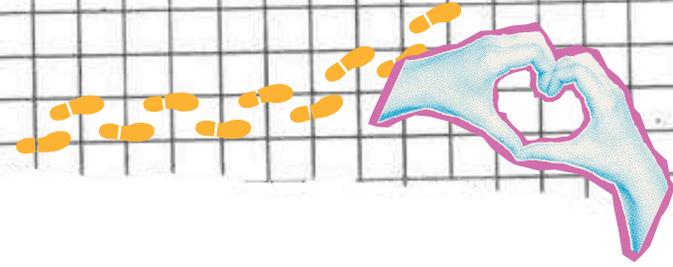
The guide is published at <https://www.step-institute.org/toy-free-month/>.

The guide is developed in the scope of the Erasmus+ project *Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners* and is thus free of charge.

CONTENTS

0	INTRODUCTION	4
1	GLOSSARY AND ONE PAGE SUMMARIES	6
2	TOY INDUSTRY IMPACT ON THE HUMAN HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT	8
3	SDGS AND GREEN COMP BACKGROUND	12
4	SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION	14
	4.1 Why Sustainable Education Matters in Early Childhood	16
	4.2 Benefits of ESD for Young Learners	18
	4.3 Effective Pedagogical Approaches for Implementing ESD in Kindergarten	20
5	TOY-FREE MONTH GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION	22
6	TOY-FREE MONTH IN KINDERGARTEN DOBRNA (SLOVENIA)	32
	6.1 Toy-Free Month at Kindergarten Dobrna	32
	6.2 Toy-Free Month in the First Age Group (1-2 Years)	37
	6.3 Toy-Free Month in the Age Group 5-6 Years	45
7	TOY-FREE MONTH IN SCHMETTERLING KINDERGARTEN (AUSTRIA)	58
8	ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR TFM GAMES AND TOYS	59
9	LITERATURE	60

INTRODUCTION



In the forest, we gathered cones and sticks, and I made a magic wand out of them. Then we could do magic. (A child from Kindergarten Dobrna)



I appreciate that the kindergarten takes part in various projects and that the educators make an effort to bring them closer to the children. Based on what I've seen, I can say that the children had plenty of interesting "recycled" items available and that they truly enjoyed reusing them as toys. A particular favorite among the youngest was the slide for small objects, made from cardboard tubes. (Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)

Imagine a playroom filled with laughter, creativity, and natural materials. No plastic toys, no batteries; just curious minds and open space. That's how Toy-Free Month began for us...

In this guide, we introduce you to an innovative and environmentally conscious practice: the Toy-Free Month (TFM). The concept behind TFM is simple, yet transformative: for one month (or longer), kindergartens remove conventional, pre-made toys from the playroom/classroom. Children are invited to engage in open-ended, creative play using sustainable or recycled materials and self-made toys, also from things that can be found in nature. This practice stimulates children's imagination and creativity, fosters cooperation and problem-solving skills, while also nurturing their awareness of environmental responsibility from an early age.

A shared journey

We designed this guide as a practical and inspiring handbook for kindergarten teachers. Born from the collaboration between passionate sustainability experts, early childhood educators, and hands-on kindergarten teachers, this guide grew out of a shared vision: to help fellow educators bring TFM to life in their own classrooms. Inside, you'll find step-by-step guidance, not just on how to plan and run it, but how to reflect meaningfully afterward. Along the way, we touch on ideas like sustainability, zero-waste living, and general ecology, all rooted in the broader goals of the SDGs and the European GreenComp. You'll also discover creative ways to craft your own eco-friendly toys - ideas that have inspired us and will hopefully inspire you too.

Our inspiration

The guide was created within the scope of Erasmus+ project “Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners” inspired by the exemplary practice implemented by the dedicated and enthusiastic team of Kindergarten Dobrna from Slovenia. The TFM practice has been a vital part of life in this kindergarten since the school year 2014/15. Enriched by feedback from teachers, children and parents, this guide emphasizes the broader impact of sustainable education – not only on the individual, but also on community and society level.

Why Toy-Free?

This guide is an **open invitation to educators**: step into the Toy-Free Month journey and **welcome children into a world of imagination, open-ended play, and a gentle connection with nature**. When we involve families and communities in this experience, we plant habits that grow far beyond the playroom walls. We hope this guide feels like a companion - something you can return to, share with colleagues, and grow from together. Let the month without conventional toys become a month full of imagination, creative play, learning and care for our planet.



1. GLOSSARY



I really appreciate that you showed us how something beautiful can be made from natural and recycled materials. It meant a lot to my child too – he’s become more independent and imaginative. Now he brings home every little stone because he wants to make something out of it. (Parent - Kindergarten Dobrna)

Zero Waste is the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse and recovery of products, packaging and materials without burning, and with no discharges to land, water or air that threaten the environment or human health ([Zero Waste International Alliance](#), 2018).

Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It involves balancing environmental health, economic viability, and social well-being to ensure long-term harmony between people and the planet.

SDGs are seventeen global goals set by the United Nations to build a more just, healthy, and sustainable world by 2030. For educators, the SDGs offer a framework to connect classroom activities – like caring for nature, promoting kindness, or reducing waste – to larger global values and shared responsibilities.

ESD – Education for Sustainable Development is an approach to teaching that helps children understand how their actions affect the world and encourages them to think critically, care deeply, and act responsibly. In practice, ESD means embedding sustainability into everyday learning—through nature play, storytelling, community involvement, and thoughtful reflection.

Circular Economy is a model of thinking and acting that encourages reducing waste and using resources wisely. In early education, this can mean reusing materials for play, repairing instead of discarding, and teaching children the value of caring for what we have. It shifts the focus from “take-make-throw away” to “reuse-rethink-recycle.”

Systems Thinking: A holistic approach to problem-solving that recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of elements within a whole system (e.g., how environment, society, and economy relate).

Microplastic is tiny plastic particles (<5mm) from the breakdown of larger plastics or intentionally added to products like cosmetics. Common sources include microbeads, synthetic clothing fibers, and plastic debris.



Play-Based Learning: An educational approach in which children learn through structured and unstructured play activities that foster development in multiple domains.

Experiential Learning: Learning through direct experience, often involving hands-on, inquiry-based, or project-driven activities.

Inquiry-Based Learning: An approach that encourages children to ask questions, investigate solutions, and construct understanding through exploration.

Free Play: Play that is child-initiated and child-directed, not structured by adults; vital for vocabulary development, creativity, and social skills.

Multi-sensory Experiences: Activities involving more than one sense (touch, smell, sound, sight, taste) to deepen understanding, especially of abstract concepts.

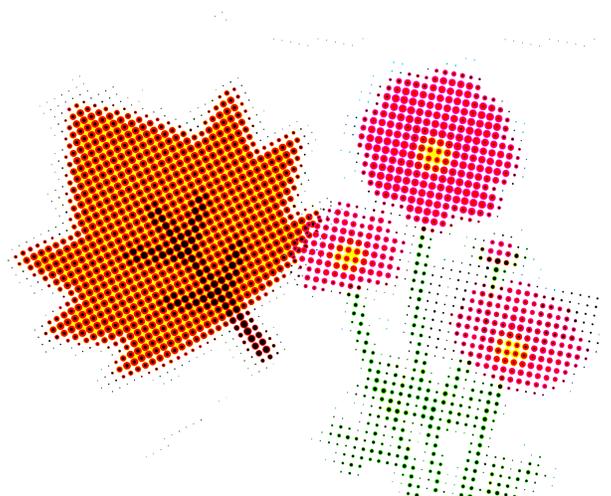
Nature-Based Learning: Outdoor education and activities that foster environmental connection and stewardship.

Eco-literacy: Understanding ecological concepts, natural systems, and human-environment interactions.

Environmental Stewardship: Responsible use and protection of the natural environment through sustainable practices and behaviours.

Holistic Development: Education that considers all aspects of a child's growth, cognitive, social, emotional, physical, moral, and creative.

Ethical Awareness: Recognizing and reflecting on moral issues like fairness, justice, and responsibility as part of learning





ONE PAGE SUMMARY

2. TOY INDUSTRY IMPACT ON THE HUMAN HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The toy industry plays a significant role in the lives of children, shaping their development, play experiences, and imagination. However, beyond its benefits, the industry also raises important concerns about children's health and environmental sustainability. The negative impact of the toy industry on human health and the environment is manifested in:

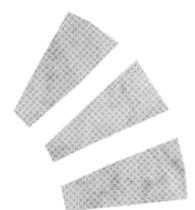
- the use of **non-durable materials**, e.g. poor-quality plastic that is not recyclable and contains hazardous substances such as phthalates, lead and bisphenol A.
- **large ecological and carbon footprint** in the production of toys (especially those made of plastic - plastic is made from petroleum products, electricity consumption for production using non-renewable raw materials and water), air, water and soil pollution in the production of toys,
- generation of **large amounts of waste** through excessive packaging of toys.

The industry follows a "**take, make, waste**" model: extract oil, produce toys, then dispose of them. Even reused toys often end up as waste, since most aren't recyclable due to mixed materials and strict safety regulations. Europe is trying to move away from in favour of a circular economy, which aims to extend the life cycle of products through the use of durable, safe, recyclable materials and through repair, sharing and reuse of items.

What's most important, the toy sector has an outsized influence: it creates a culture of consumption and waste that spills over into other areas as kids grow up. Toys are often the first way children experience shopping and consumption, and thus, they set the standard for how kids interact with products and teach them to constantly look for the next new thing. That's why we need a sustainable and zero-waste approach to toys, starting from the earliest years of childhood and on into pre-school education.

GO TO THE CHAPTER





ONE PAGE SUMMARY

3. SDGS AND GREEN COMP BACKGROUND

The sustainable path of the world is set by the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** - a global blueprint adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There are 17 interconnected goals, designed to address the world's most pressing challenges, ranging from poverty, inequality, and health to education, climate change, and environmental degradation.

Another essential tool for guiding early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers is The **GreenComp**, in nurturing sustainability from the earliest stages of development. While young children may not yet grasp complex global challenges, early childhood is a critical period for forming attitudes, values, and behaviours that support sustainable living.

GreenComp identifies sustainability as a key competence that enables individuals to act in favour of environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability. The framework outlines four interrelated competence areas:

- **Embodying sustainability values,**
- **Embracing complexity in sustainability,**
- **Envisioning sustainable futures,**
- **Acting for sustainability.**

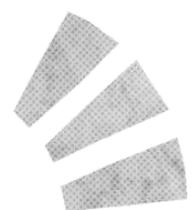
Each area includes specific competences that help individuals think critically, collaborate, and take informed, responsible action for sustainability in personal, educational, and professional contexts. GreenComp supports the **European Green Deal** and aligns with global efforts like the SDGs by fostering the skills needed for a just and green transition.

GreenComp is important for kindergarten teachers for specific roles:

1. Laying the Foundation for Lifelong Sustainability Values
2. Encouraging Systems Thinking at an Age-Appropriate Level
3. Nurturing Imagination and Hope
4. Fostering Action and Participation

[GO TO THE CHAPTER](#)





ONE PAGE SUMMARY

4. SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

Why Sustainable Education Matters in Early Childhood

Early childhood is a uniquely critical period for shaping values and habits that last a lifetime. During this stage, children are highly receptive and open to new ways of understanding the world. **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)** provides the foundation for lifelong environmental awareness, empathy, and social responsibility. By integrating sustainability into daily routines, play, and relationships, children learn about nature, fairness, cooperation, and caring for others. ESD empowers children as capable agents of change and aligns naturally with play-based, child-centred approaches to early education.

Benefits of ESD for Young Learners:

- Cognitive Development
- Socio-Emotional Growth
- Environmental Awareness
- Physical Development
- Moral and Ethical Awareness

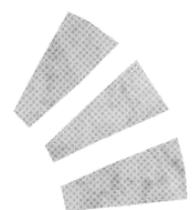
Effective Pedagogical Approaches for ESD

ESD is a holistic, integrated way of teaching and living. The following approaches show how educators can embed sustainability in daily practice:

- **Play-based and experiential learning:** inquiry projects, storytelling, creative arts, and free play that encourage curiosity and self-expression.
- **Nature-based and outdoor education:** regular walks, gardening, observing insects, and using natural materials for exploration and art.
- **Integration across the curriculum:** embed sustainability into everyday routines such as water use during handwashing, sorting recycling after meals, and mindful energy use.
- **Systems thinking:** help children see the links between caring for nature, fairness, and wise resource use, fostering holistic perspectives.
- **Teacher's role:** act as a facilitator, observer, and reflective guide who encourages curiosity, resilience, and open exploration rather than directing every activity.

GO TO THE CHAPTER





ONE PAGE SUMMARY

5. TOY-FREE MONTH GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

With an open mindset, good preparation, and teamwork, the TFM becomes a meaningful experience for children, teachers, and families.

1. Inspiration, Shared Vision & Practical Planning

Present the TFM concept and its benefits to colleagues. Form TFM team. Discuss vision, possible challenges and connect the initiative to the curriculum.

2. Playroom Setup: Creating an Inspiring Environment

Involve children and staff. Remove toys and explain the change to children with care. Create inviting play areas. Ensure safety, comfort, and variety.

3. Preparing the Children: ABC of TFM

-  Acknowledge the change honestly and empathetically.
-  Build excitement through stories or mystery materials.
-  Co-create rules for safe, respectful play.
-  Trust their creativity and give them space to experiment.
-  Frame every discovery as a win – focus on learning, not perfection.
-  Make it meaningful – connect play to empathy and care for nature.

4. Preparing the Materials: Gather & Organize

Start collecting and sorting materials early with help from staff, parents, and the local community. Focus on reuse. Quality matters more than quantity.

5. Creating Sustainable Toys

Involve children in making play materials – it builds ownership, creativity, and problem-solving. Encourage multi-use and open-ended designs.

6. Involving Parents

Present TFM as an opportunity for children to grow socially, emotionally, and creatively. Invite parents to actively contribute. Reflect and learn together.

7. Engaging the Local Community

Connect with local artisans, organizations, or businesses. Encourage continued collaboration so the TFM practice becomes a shared tradition.

GO TO THE CHAPTER



2. TOY INDUSTRY IMPACT ON THE HUMAN HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT



The workshops were a wonderful experience for us parents too – simple, but full of ideas. Watching my child joyfully create something from what we'd usually throw away was truly special. (Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)

The toy industry plays a significant role in the lives of children, shaping their development, play experiences, and imagination.

However, beyond its benefits, the industry also raises important concerns about children's health and environmental sustainability.

Many mass-produced toys, especially inexpensive plastic ones, **contain toxic substances** that can be harmful to young children. Because children often explore the world through touch, taste, and close interaction with toys, their exposure to these chemicals can be especially high.

Some of the most concerning substances include:

- Phthalates – used to make plastic flexible but linked to hormone disruption.
- Lead – found in some paints and electronics, can cause developmental delays and cognitive problems.
- Bisphenol A (BPA) – associated with hormone interference and long-term health risks.
- Flame retardants – while added for safety, these chemicals can negatively affect brain development.

Even though many countries have regulations on toy safety, some toys, particularly those sold through unregulated online platforms, may not meet safety standards, putting children at risk.

Plastic or synthetic toys can also pose **physical dangers**, such as:

- Choking hazards from small or detachable parts,
- Sharp or fragile components that can break and cause injury.
- Battery-related incidents, such as chemical burns or serious internal injuries from swallowed button

Environmental Footprint of the Toy Industry

Toys don't just impact individual health – they also contribute to broader environmental problems through the ways they're produced, packaged, and discarded.



Plastic Overload

The toy industry relies heavily on plastic – over 90% of toys are made from plastic materials, many of which are non-recyclable (World Sustainable Toy Day, 2023). This leads to:

- **Plastic and microplastic pollution**, especially as broken or unused toys are thrown away.
- **Short product lifespans**, as toys often become outdated due to changing trends or children's rapid development.
- **Growing waste volumes**, since most discarded toys end up in landfills or incinerators, contributing to the global waste crisis.



High Carbon Footprint

Toy production is **resource-intensive**, involving:

- Oil-based plastic manufacturing,
- Long-distance shipping from overseas factories,
- Energy-heavy processes that release significant greenhouse gas emissions.



Manufacturing the plastic for toys generates roughly 25 million tonnes of CO₂ annually, with an additional 20% resulting from transportation – totalling ~26 million tonnes of CO₂ per year (compared to fashion industry 280 billion tonnes), and around 0.8–1% of global plastic production goes into toys (World Sustainable Toy Day, 2023).



Excessive Packaging Waste

Many toys are overpackaged in layers of plastic and cardboard. This packaging creates large volumes of waste, often disposed of immediately, and it is frequently non-recyclable, further polluting the environment.

Electronic Waste (E-Waste)

With the rise of digital and battery-operated toys, the toy industry is increasingly contributing to e-waste, one of the world's fastest-growing waste streams. These toys often contain hazardous materials and are difficult to recycle due to their complex components. Frequently, they end up in landfills or poorly managed recycling facilities, where they pose health and safety risks to both workers and local communities.

The above information confirms that the overproduction of toys has negative consequences for the environment and human health. These impacts are compounded by the fact that there is an enormous waste of environmental resources (including non-renewable raw materials, oil, water, and energy) required for the manufacture of toys that often have very short life cycles.

Statistics show that kids lose interest in 25% of their toys within just one week. That's why still, 80% of toys end up in landfills, incinerators, or the ocean, where they contribute to microplastic pollution (World Sustainable Toy Day, 2023).

The industry follows a "**take, make, waste**" model: extract oil, produce toys, then dispose of them. Even reused toys often end up as waste, since most aren't recyclable due to mixed materials and strict safety regulations.

Though not the largest industry, the toy sector has an outsized influence: **it creates a culture of consumption and waste** that spills over into other areas as kids grow up. Toys are often the first way children experience shopping and consumption, and thus they set the standard for how kids interact with products and teach them to constantly look the next new thing.

This is why we need a sustainable and zero-waste approach to toys, starting from the earliest years of childhood and on into pre-school education.

So, is there a concept of sustainable and zero waste?

Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It involves balancing environmental health, economic viability, and social well-being to ensure long-term harmony between people and the planet. In practice, sustainability means using resources wisely, reducing environmental impact, supporting fair labour, and protecting ecosystems.

In early childhood settings, this includes:

- **Ecological Sustainability:** Minimizing environmental impact through reduced resource use, waste generation, and carbon footprint.
- **Social Sustainability:** Promoting community values, cooperation, and equitable access to opportunities and resources.
- **Economic Sustainability:** Encouraging resourcefulness and low-cost, long-term solutions.



"THE TOY INDUSTRY PUNCHES ABOVE ITS WEIGHT IN TERMS OF IMPORTANCE, AND AS SUCH, WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO **THE KIDS WHO ARE OUR CUSTOMERS** AND **THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET** IN WHICH THEY'LL LIVE AS ADULTS."

WORLD SUSTAINABLE TOY DAY, 2023

According to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), children should learn about sustainability not just theoretically, but through lived experiences and daily practices.

Zero Waste is the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse and recovery of products, packaging and materials without burning, and with no discharges to land, water or air that threaten the environment or human health ([Zero Waste International Alliance](#), 2018).

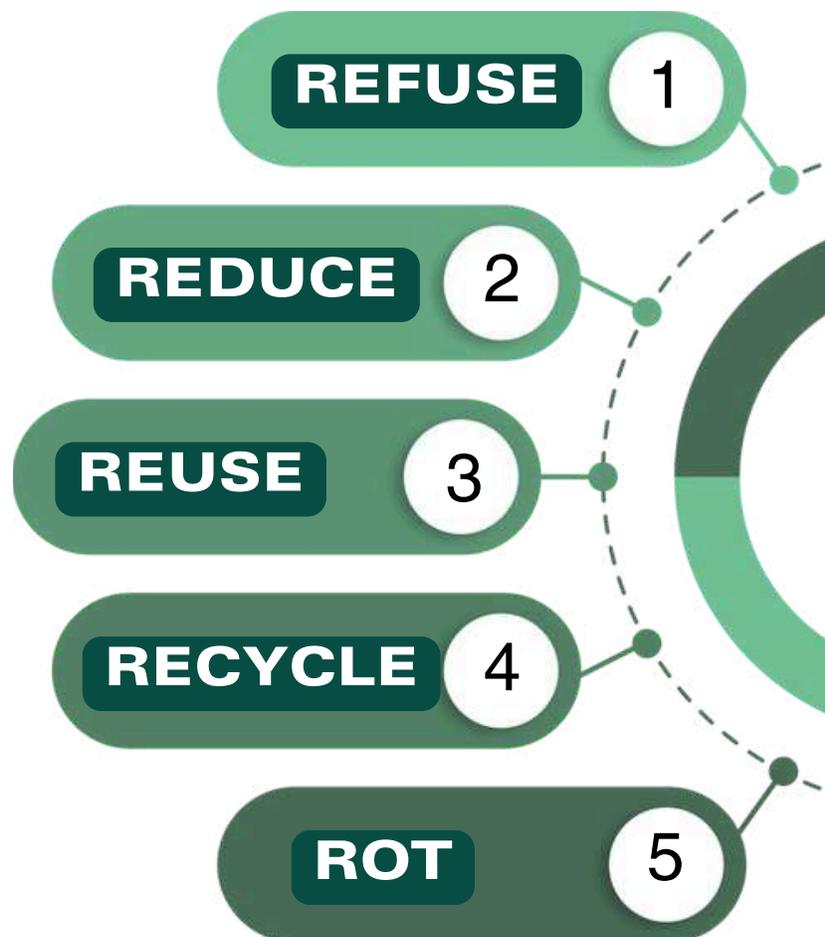
Zero-waste means 'no waste' and it appears as a new sustainability paradigm to address the global waste problem. Zero-waste opposes the view of waste as a valueless and unavoidable by-product at the end of a product's lifecycle (Zaman, 2022).

It is very closely related to circular economies, as the zero-waste approach adopts a closed-loop strategy in which all resources are conserved through responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery. The goal is to reuse raw materials as many times as possible throughout a product's life cycle, preventing waste from being sent to incineration or landfills and avoiding harmful discharges to water or air (Bogusz et al., 2021).

The goal of zero waste is to close the loop, mimicking natural systems where all outputs become inputs for something else.

The "5Rs" of Zero Waste – Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Rot – provide a simple framework for kindergarten activities and policies.

This guide supports educators, kindergarten teachers in implementing zero waste rules and SDGs, and allows them to acquire and extend green competences in their professional pathway.



3. SDGS AND GREEN COMP BACKGROUND



We believe this is a great idea, and it's truly amazing what can be created from recycled materials. It seems to us that our daughter found it very interesting and explored your creations with great curiosity. (Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)

The Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) are a global blueprint adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There are **17 interconnected goals, designed to address the world's most pressing challenges**, ranging from poverty, inequality, and health to education, climate change, and environmental degradation.

Each SDG has specific targets (169 in total) and indicators to measure progress. These goals aim to **achieve a balance among economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection**, with a central focus on leaving no one behind. The SDGs provide a universal language and framework for governments, businesses, educators, and civil society to align efforts toward a sustainable future.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



GreenComp identifies sustainability as a key competence that enables individuals to act in favour of environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability. The **framework outlines four interrelated competence areas:**

- Embodying sustainability values,
- Embracing complexity in sustainability,
- Envisioning sustainable futures,
- Acting for sustainability.

Each area includes **specific competences** that help individuals think critically, collaborate, and take informed, responsible action for sustainability in personal, educational, and professional contexts. GreenComp supports the European Green Deal and aligns with global efforts like the SDGs by fostering the skills needed for a just and green transition.

The GreenComp is an essential tool for guiding early childhood educators, especially kindergarten teachers, in nurturing sustainability from the earliest stages of development. While young children may not yet grasp complex global challenges, early childhood is a critical period for forming attitudes, values, and behaviours that support sustainable living.



GreenComp is important for kindergarten teachers for specific roles:

1. Laying the Foundation for Lifelong Sustainability Values

GreenComp emphasizes "embodying sustainability values," which helps teachers instil respect for nature, empathy, care, and responsibility in young learners. By integrating simple, everyday practices like recycling, caring for plants, or conserving water, teachers can foster habits and values that last a lifetime.

2. Encouraging Systems Thinking at an Age-Appropriate Level

Through "embracing complexity in sustainability," GreenComp helps teachers guide children to observe and understand basic relationships in nature (e.g., how sunlight helps plants grow or how animals depend on clean environments). These experiences develop early systems thinking and curiosity.

3. Nurturing Imagination and Hope

The competence area "envisioning sustainable futures" supports creative activities where children imagine a better world – such as cleaner parks or happy animals. These activities cultivate hope, agency, and creativity, which are vital for building a positive outlook on the future and for developing problem-solving skills.

4. Fostering Action and Participation

Under "acting for sustainability," GreenComp encourages young children to take part in simple, meaningful actions, like planting trees, sorting waste, or turning off lights. Kindergarten teachers can guide these actions through playful, participatory learning, helping children feel empowered and involved.

5. Supporting Teachers' Professional Growth

GreenComp also provides a structured framework for kindergarten teachers to develop their own sustainability competences. It encourages reflective teaching, collaboration with families and communities, and the creation of sustainable learning environments both indoors and outdoors.

By applying the GreenComp framework, kindergarten teachers become key agents of change, helping to shape a new generation that is more connected to the environment, more socially responsible, and more equipped to contribute to a sustainable future. Early childhood education, enriched with GreenComp values, is not just about learning; it's about living sustainability from the very start.



4. SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION



I'm really happy that the kindergarten encourages play without pre-made toys. I think my child has learned more about cooperation, communication, and playing together during this time than ever before. We also do more creative activities at home now. (Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)

Sustainable development encompasses three interdependent dimensions: **environmental, economic, and social**. Within the social dimension, Sustainable Education, or better yet, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) plays a crucial role by empowering individuals to contribute actively to a more sustainable future. According to UNESCO, ESD is "education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future" (UNESCO, 2020).

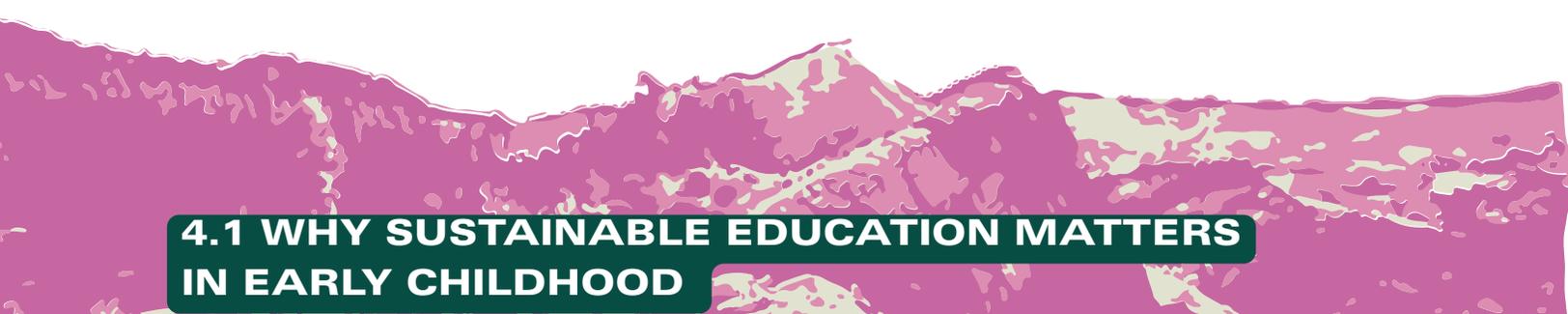
For young children in kindergarten, ESD is particularly important as it is both developmentally appropriate and foundational. Early childhood is a time of rapid brain development, social learning, and emotional growth. It is also a time when children form their understanding of the world. Research shows that experiences during this formative period have long-lasting effects on values and behaviour. Integrating sustainable education promotes essential competencies such as critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and environmental awareness that contribute to lifelong environmentally responsible behaviour (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Early exposure to these concepts nurtures **a generation better equipped to respond to complex global challenges**, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and social injustice.

ESD goals align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG Target 4.7, which emphasizes improving education quality to prepare learners for global challenges. A core learning outcome within ESD is cultivating agency, the capacity for children to act independently and make choices. ESD encourages children to make informed decisions, take action, recognize problems and search for solutions, and make changes in their local environment (Kahrman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024). This transforms children from **passive recipients of information into active participants and decision-makers**.

Additionally, sustainability concepts can be integrated into daily classroom activities and everyday moments (Kahrman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024). Sustainable behaviours are normalized through simple routines such as mindful water use, minimizing food waste, or sorting recycling. The aim is not just teaching lessons about sustainability but making sustainable practices ingrained, unconscious habits. This approach demonstrates that **ESD is about shaping the entire learning environment and daily practice to reflect sustainable values** (Sneddon & Pettit, 2024).





4.1 WHY SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION MATTERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Early childhood represents a uniquely critical period for introducing Education for Sustainable Development. This stage is not just an opportune moment but a pivotal developmental window for instilling foundational principles that will shape individuals throughout their lives.

A Pivotal Stage for Lifelong Values

Young children are naturally curious and highly impressionable, making **early childhood a crucial period for cultivating environmental awareness and instilling sustainable values** (Samuelsson, 2011). Research shows that the first five years of life are a “*window of opportunity*” when values, attitudes, and behaviours are deeply shaped, impacting lifelong actions (Pratiwi et al., 2025). During this sensitive developmental phase, children's brains are highly plastic and receptive, enabling them to form enduring patterns of thought and behaviour. Introducing sustainability at this stage through everyday activities, like examining the life cycle of a plant or investigating the local environment, takes advantage of children's openness to learning. These experiences help imprint sustainable behaviours and mindsets likely to last a lifetime (Nian, 2024).

Empowering Young Children as Agents of Change

ESD empowers children as active agents of change, not passive recipients. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are citizens and rights holders who should have meaningful participation in shaping their present and future in sustainable ways. They are competent, ready to construct their own identities and lives. Evidence shows that **ESD should be present in early childhood both as a subject of learning and as a pedagogical approach**, as even preschool-aged children can develop some understanding of global problems and their consequences.

ESD shifts the focus from protecting children's innocence to empowering them as capable participants in helping shape a sustainable future (Pramling-Samuelsson, 2011). Rather than shielding them from complex issues, ESD allows children to engage with these topics in age-appropriate ways, developing **critical thinking, problem-solving, and agency. These skills are essential for future change-makers**, and it's the task of kindergarten educators to nurture them (Collins & Garrity, 2023; Kahrman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024).



Compatibility with Early Childhood Pedagogies

ESD aligns naturally with play-based, child-centred, and experiential learning approaches familiar to kindergarten teachers. ESD is not a standalone subject but is integrated across all activities and routines (Pratiwi et al., 2025). Constructivist approaches, project-based investigations, and storytelling all help children grasp abstract concepts like sustainability in hands-on, age-appropriate ways (Collins & Garrity, 2023). ESD supports the **concretization of abstract concepts through tangible, practical experiences**, such as planting seeds, caring for living things or exploring the community, which is key for young learners. It also promotes safe, inclusive learning environments and responsive educator–child relationships, central to developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten (Chang Rundgren, 2023).



4.2 BENEFITS OF ESD FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Integrating Education for Sustainable Development into early childhood curricula offers several developmental advantages for kindergarten children, spanning cognitive, socio-emotional, environmental, and ethical dimensions.

1. Cognitive Development

ESD actively promotes core 21st-century competencies such as systems thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Through **inquiry-based learning, hands-on activities, and collaborative projects**, children are encouraged to explore complex issues and develop innovative solutions (Sharma, 2023). ESD also cultivates collaborative decision-making and a sense of intergenerational responsibility, future-ready skills needed in an ever-changing world. By analysing interconnected challenges, working effectively in groups, and reflecting on the long-term consequences of their choices, young children develop adaptive thinking abilities that go beyond traditional academic learning of environmental education (Collins & Garrity, 2023).

2. Socio-Emotional Growth

ESD is key in building crucial social skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence. It emphasizes inclusivity, human rights and shared responsibility, helping to create classroom environments that celebrate diversity and promote a strong sense of community (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Activities involving collaborative play enable children to **practice sharing, cooperation, and understanding others' perspectives**. These ESD approaches build children's emotional resilience and strong interpersonal skills, preparing them to flourish in diverse communities (Sharma, 2023).



3. Environmental Awareness

By integrating ESD, children cultivate "**eco-literacy**", an understanding of ecological concepts, biodiversity, and interconnected natural systems. **Hands-on experiences** like gardening, observing local wildlife, and exploring outdoor spaces deepen both knowledge and emotional connection to nature, fostering enduring respect for the environment (Sharma, 2023). **Practical projects** such as recycling, tree planting, and community clean-ups nurture environmental stewardship, reinforced by positive role modelling from teachers and classmates (Pratiwi et al., 2025).



4. Physical Development and Motor Skills

Nature-based, movement-rich ESD activities significantly enhance children's physical development. **Outdoor exploration and sensory play** strengthen gross and fine motor skills, while collecting and sorting natural materials, planting seeds, or creating environmental art all build **hand-eye coordination, dexterity, and grip precision** vital for later academic tasks. This active engagement in nature not only benefits children's physical health but also fosters a meaningful connection with the environment, reinforcing sustainability principles (Sharma, 2023).



5. Moral and Ethical Awareness

ESD in early childhood is a powerful tool for developing a **strong ethical foundation for global citizenship**. By introducing age-appropriate discussions about justice, fairness, and equity (UNESCO, 2020), and using stories that address environmental and social challenges, educators help children build moral awareness from an early age. These experiences encourage **informed decision-making and compassionate contributions** to their communities, instilling an enduring sense of intergenerational responsibility (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

4.3 EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES FOR IMPLEMENTING ESD IN KINDERGARTEN

Play-based, experiential, and hands-on learning play lies at the heart of early childhood learning, offering children with invaluable opportunities to make sense of themselves and their world. **ESD flourishes when integrated into active, interdisciplinary approaches** such as storytelling, play-based activities, and project-based investigations (Sharma, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2025). Free, unstructured play, supported by teachers, boosts vocabulary, strengthens social-emotional skills, and fosters creativity. As play evolves, children are challenged cognitively and socially, preparing them for complex problem-solving (Santer et al., 2007).

Kindergarten educators should prioritize hands-on activities over rote tasks, using **inquiry-based projects** to spark curiosity and innovative thinking. For example:

Gardening: Letting children plant, observe growth, and harvest.

Art from recyclables: Creating creative projects using waste materials.

Dramatic play: Role-playing as community helpers focused on sustainability.

Storytelling: Using books and oral stories to explore topics of environmental protection (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Multi-sensory learning, through touch, sight, sound, smell, and even taste, makes abstract sustainability concepts real. Children might:

- Feel the textures of leaves and soil.
- Smell compost or flowers.
- Listen to birds and natural sounds.
- Physically sort items for recycling.

These rich, sensory experiences help children **internalize sustainability as something tangible** (Kahriman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024).



Nature-Based and Outdoor Education

Outdoor play is a powerful medium for ESD, immersing children in nature and laying foundations for environmental stewardship. Engaging directly with the outdoors, such as nature walks, observing insects, collecting natural objects, etc., cultivates curiosity, wonder, and a sense of connection to the earth. In addition to developing appreciation for the natural world, these activities strengthen motor skills and coordination.

Kindergarten teachers can:

- **Schedule regular outdoor exploration.**
- **Encourage observation and collection of natural objects.**
- **Organize eco-art projects using leaves, rocks, or twigs.**
- **Emphasize sensory experiences with natural materials.**

Such approaches stimulate creativity and reinforce core sustainability values (Kahriman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024; Sharma, 2023).

Integration across All Curriculum Areas

ESD is most effective when it is embedded holistically into every aspect of the curriculum and daily classroom life, rather than treated as a stand-alone topic. Integrate sustainability into routine activities and discussions:

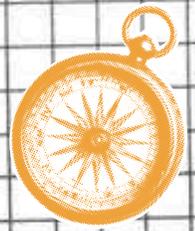
- **Talk about water conservation during handwashing,**
- **Minimize and discuss food waste after snack time,**
- **Sort waste for recycling and composting** (Kahriman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024).



Adopt a “systems thinking” approach by helping children see the connections between caring for nature, fairness, and wise resource use. For example, guide them to understand how environmental, social, and economic factors are linked. Educators are key agents for this transformation, employing intentional strategies and reflective practice (UNESCO, 2020). **Practical techniques** include:

- Using picture books and storytelling to address sustainability or fairness.
- Embedding recycling and gardening in play and routines.
- Posing open-ended questions (e.g., “What happens if we use too much water?”).
- Facilitating group problem-solving to promote cooperation and collective responsibility (Kahriman-Pamuk & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2024).

5. TOY-FREE MONTH GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION



I was really impressed with the workshop for parents, where we created things from recycled and natural materials. I saw my child so engaged for the first time, without even realizing he was learning. Now at home he often makes things out of boxes and tubes – the creativity just flows. (Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)

Toy-Free Month (TFM) is a chance to invite **creativity, imagination, and sustainability** into the playroom or classroom. Preparation is key to creating a playful and meaningful experience for children, educators, and families. When implemented in a holistic, step-by-step manner, guided by openness, curiosity, patience, and kindness toward children, TFM can have a lasting and profound impact.

There isn't a single "recipe" or one right way to implement the TFM. **There are many ways to plan and implement the TFM activities.** What truly matters is connecting it to the kindergarten's vision and values and working together with motivated staff who is eager to implement the TFM with enthusiasm, openness and a willingness to learn. So let the flexibility and courage be your guide and see the guidelines as recommendations and ideas that you can shape and adapt to your own situation and experiences.

1. Inspiration, Shared vision & Practical Planning

Inform and inspire: Present the concept of TFM and its benefits to the kindergarten staff colleagues: cognitive development, socio-emotional growth, environmental awareness and physical well-being, moral and ethical awareness, and development of fine motor skill (see more in the chapter Benefits of ESD for Young Learners).

Highlight the importance and benefits of free, imaginative and pretend play, as well as experiential learning. When children explore, experience and try things on their own, they learn more deeply. Mistakes also become an opportunity to learn, and asking questions opens their minds, building creativity and curiosity. Think about the current trends in society and your local environment (e.g. the fast pace of lives, rising levels of stress, individualism, consumerism etc.) and how TFM may be an opportunity to slow down, focus on free play, develop social and emotional skills, learn to be present mindfully "here and now", and care for the nature.

You can start by thinking about and discussing the following questions:

- What do we believe in as individuals and as a kindergarten team?
- Why do we want to invest in strengthening sustainability values?
- Why do we want to implement TFM practice (and similar projects, initiatives) in our kindergarten? What is the purpose? How does it connect with the values, priorities and vision of our kindergarten?
- What are the benefits for our children, parents/families, kindergarten staff and the local community?
- What skills and abilities do we want to nurture in our children? What knowledge or experiences should they gain? Which values do we aim to strengthen?
- What kind of play do we want to encourage?

Include staff in trial activities, such as creating a few DIY toys together to boost interest and engagement.

Form the TFM team and assign roles: Implementing activities is easier and more effective with a supportive team. Discuss roles and responsibilities (e.g., space transformation, materials coordination, family communication) and create a plan (at least a draft version) of the implementation (when, how long, which groups of children).

Think about challenges: Discuss concerns and potential obstacles (e.g., children's reactions, parental doubts) and brainstorm proactive responses and ways to overcome them.



Address the role of teachers in the TFM process and implementation. The TFM approach encourages a shift: from teachers acting as animators or leaders of structured activities to teachers becoming guides who observe, support, and monitor children's learning. This can be challenging for some teachers at first. That's why it's important to discuss such challenges as a team and work together with the leadership (principal, head of kindergarten, staff manager) and/or the kindergarten counselling team (e.g. psychologists, social pedagogues) to ensure support for the teachers.

This may include:

- Inviting an expert to give a lecture or workshop on observation and monitoring in kindergarten,
- offering intervision or supervision sessions,
- planning regular support meetings where teachers can share experiences and help each other.

Connect to curricula: Link TFM with existing educational goals, developmental milestones, national standards or teaching/learning topics.

Consider and discuss various practices in your kindergarten: How sustainable are they, and how can you introduce meaningful changes that would further support the TFM approach?

For example:

Food and meals

How do we approach daily meals?

Could we reduce packaging waste and serve more local/seasonal food?

How can we involve children in discussions about food waste?

Teaching and learning materials

How can we integrate more natural, recycled, and open-ended resources instead of relying mainly on shop-bought items?

What could we reduce or eliminate to encourage free and imaginative play?

How do we treat used or semi-used materials (e.g. colouring pencils, crayons, paper)?

How can we involve children in creating their own learning/play materials?

Waste management

How do we sort and reduce waste in our kindergarten?

Could we set up simple recycling or composting practices where children can actively take part?

Energy and resources

Are lights, heating, or digital devices used mindfully?

How could children be involved in simple “energy-saving helpers” routines?

Celebrations and events

Do we rely on disposable materials and decorations or single-use items?

How could we shift toward reusable, handmade, or nature-inspired alternatives?

How can we invite children and families to help us rethink our approach, making the event (even) more sustainable?

Community connections

How do we engage with local businesses, artisans, or families?

Could partnerships support sustainability (e.g., sourcing leftover fabrics from a tailor, wood scraps from a carpenter, or inviting parents to share their own sustainable practices)?

How can we take a step further in promoting sustainability as a value and way of life in cooperation with the local community?



2. Playroom Setup: Creating an Inspiring Environment

Change the space with care: Remove conventional toys and explain the change to children with empathy and clarity. This part can be done either together with children or in advance without their active participation. In either case, it is important to talk with children and prepare them for the change.

Create zones/corners for exploration:

E.g., you can set up areas for building, role play, sensory activities, nature-based materials, and creative expression. There is no need to redesign the entire playroom. You can keep the idea/concept/structure as it usually is and just change the toys and activities, so that they fit the TFM approach.

Use open-ended materials – natural, leftover or recycled (recyclable), such as baskets of cardboard, fabric scraps, wood pieces, buttons, leaves, paper rolls, stones etc. It goes without saying that all materials need to be clean, safe, age-appropriate, and varied.



Collaborate and involve others: Be kind to yourself! There is no need to prepare everything in advance and on your own. You can collect and create materials and sustainable toys together with children, parents and kindergarten colleagues. Also, try to keep it nice and cosy: add some cushions or other soft, pleasant-to-touch materials, and natural lighting to support calm and collaborative play.

“Playroom” in nature? For sure!

Taking children outdoors regularly, in all kinds of weather, provides invaluable opportunities for free play, exploration, and connection with the natural world. Rain, wind, or sunshine each offer unique experiences that spark curiosity, creativity, and resilience. Out in nature, children can discover textures, shapes, and living things, while learning to care for the environment (e.g., collecting leaves, observing insects, or gently handling plants). Outdoor play encourages collaboration, problem-solving, and physical activity and motor development, while nurturing respect for the world around them. By supporting children in these experiences, we help them develop a sense of responsibility, wonder, and a lifelong connection to nature.



3. Preparing the Children: ABC of TFM

Children need time, clarity, reassurance, and support when routines change. A TFM can feel exciting, but it is also something new, unconventional, and can be unsettling or unpleasant (especially for children who rely heavily on familiar, conventional toys).

Preparing them in a gradual and supportive way helps to minimize resistance and encourages openness, curiosity, and willingness to try new things. This preparation stage is not just about telling children what will happen, but about involving them in the journey from the very beginning. When children understand the “why” behind the change, when their voices are heard, and when they can contribute meaningfully, they are far more likely to embrace the experience with joy, creativity, and ownership.

You can follow the **ABC** of the **TFM** approach:



Acknowledge

- Explain the TFM in simple, honest, age-appropriate language. **Talk openly about the change.**
“We will explore what we can create without our usual toys.”
“For a while, we won’t use our usual toys. Instead, we will create new games and adventures together!”
- Use stories, puppets, drawings or games to introduce the idea. **Reassure children** that play, fun, curiosity, creativity, friendship will still be central.
- **Accept all emotions and reactions.** Validate them and provide emotional support. Discuss with children what could help them feel more of the pleasant emotions (e.g., excitement, curiosity, joy) or what could help them handle worry, hesitation, sadness or even anger.



Build Excitement

- **Try to turn anticipation into enthusiasm.** Introduce the idea through a story, create a “mystery box”, a “materials museum” with unusual objects or a “makers’ corner”.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** *“What could this become?”*, *“How can we play with this?”* or *“How can we use this (differently)?”*
- Focus on introducing **small challenges** to help children imagine new ways to play.



Co-create Rules and Space

- Children adapt more easily when they feel **informed, included, and trusted**. Empower them by making them part of the process.
- **Involve children** in setting simple, respectful rules for sharing, using, and playing with materials and sustainable toys.
- Encourage them to visualise their new space for playing and learning and invite them to **participate in the creation** of the TFM playroom/classroom. In this way, it is not only about announcing TFM but inviting children to co-own the process which contributes to the smoother transition and more powerful learning outcomes.
- **Ask questions**, such as: *“What do we need to play kindly and safely?”* or *“What do you imagine having in your new TFM playroom?”*.
- Let children create simple rule posters. Reinforce the idea: ***This is our TFM month that we create together.***



Trust Their Creativity

- Children are natural inventors with boundless imagination. Often, they see possibilities in ordinary objects that adults overlook. **Trusting their creativity** means allowing them time, space, and freedom to explore without constant adult direction. Help them **build confidence and courage** to explore freely in a more unstructured and open environment, situations. Show them that **their ideas are valuable and worth exploring**, boosting confidence and independence.
- Empower yourself in a **child-centred teaching approach**, where learning grows from questions, problems, or real-life scenarios rather than direct instruction and ready-made answers. Encourage children to ask questions, to be curious. Be mindful that you should respond with openness and support, inviting them to be even more curious, brave, bold, and innovative. May the brainstorming principles guide you: *“No idea is bad or crazy, let’s explore in an open, curious and unlimited way.”*
- **Resist the urge to intervene too quickly when children seem “stuck.”** Sometimes a pause (as well as experiencing frustration) is part of the creative and learning process. Boredom can be difficult to experience, but it can so often spark imagination, creativity, innovation, and fun. Ask open-ended questions (*“What else could this be?”* or *“How can you use that in a new way?”*) instead of offering ready-made solutions.
- **Celebrate interesting, unusual or “unexpected” uses of materials or toys**, since these are signs of flexible, innovative thinking. Encourage creativity, “crazy” ideas and unconventional approach to play. Remember: messy, chaotic play can be just as (or even more) valuable as neat, structured outcomes.



Frame Every Discovery as a Win

- Not every creation will “work,” and that’s okay. **Mistakes are rich learning opportunities.**
- Teachers can model a growth mindset by framing challenges and experiments as successes in learning. Focus on **effort, perseverance, collaboration, and courage** rather than perfect results. Examples:
 - When a cardboard tower collapses: *“You tried something new—what else could we build together?”*
 - Highlight collaboration: *“You listened to each other’s ideas so well.”*
 - Reflect together: *“What surprised you today? What did you discover?”*
- Display children’s creations, even if unfinished, to **validate the process over the product.** This approach teaches resilience, problem-solving, and pride in effort - skills that extend far beyond playtime.



Make it Meaningful

- TFM is not just about playing without conventional toys, it’s about **linking play to bigger values and real-world connections**, like caring for the planet and each other. When children understand why they are doing this, their play becomes more purposeful. Making TFM meaningful ensures that children don’t just learn how to play differently, but also why it matters for their community, for relationships, and for the environment.
- **Examples for meaningful connections:**
 - Connect play to sustainability: *“By using these materials, we are helping the planet.”*
 - Link to empathy, relationships, and social and emotional skills: *“How can we play in a way that makes everyone feel included?”*, *“How did you feel when you worked together today?”* or *“What can we do when we feel frustrated when something doesn’t go the way we wanted?”*
 - Encourage storytelling: invite children to give names, roles, or adventures to their creations, integrating emotional and social meaning into play.
 - Involve reflection: *“How did it feel to make something yourself?”* or *“What did you learn about sharing today?”* or *“How did you help nature today?”*
 - Create conditions for children to explore ideas, opportunities, and possibilities, helping them learn about their world, lives, and values. Encourage them to discover new ways to create, play, connect, and grow.
 - And always remember there is no single “right” way to implement the TFM.

4. Preparing the Materials: Gather & Organize

Start with the preparation of the concept and key guidelines for the collection of materials. Link it with the planned curricula, educational goals and activities. The idea “**less is more**” can be a useful guideline to follow in this phase.

Start collecting early: Remember, there is no need to do everything on your own. Invite staff, families, and your local network to contribute clean, safe, leftover or natural items.

Store creatively: Use labelled boxes, baskets or similar options for storage (e.g., textiles, wood pieces, nature treasures) to keep the space tidy and inspiring. Include children in storing the materials in the designated spaces in the playroom.

Quality over quantity: A few diverse materials often lead to richer play than an excess of options. The most important thing to have in mind is that nothing should be purchased since TFM is about rethinking, reusing and not replacing.



5. Creating Sustainable Toys: General Guidelines

Involve children: Let them create/help to create their own toys and games from the materials. It strengthens exploration, creativity, learning, and ownership.

Follow the guideline: “**Less perfection, more participation.**” Imperfect toys made by little hands are full of meaning and have benefits. Also, there is no need to create many toys and games, remember: “Less is more” and “Quality over quantity” are the guiding principles. Focus on free and imaginative play, cooperation, development of social and emotional skills, and reflection.

Moreover, think about how you can **involve children in deciding** what to do with their creations after the end of an activity, game or an exhibition (e.g., at a school event). Explore together how these activities can connect and build upon one another, creating a sense of continuity and shared purpose.

Safety always matters: Follow all the safety rules as you do at your work and in your kindergarten. If materials are brought by children, parents or others, always check them thoroughly.

Think and foster multi-use: encourage open-ended designs, diversity and innovative/non-typical use of materials. For example, a simple cardboard box can become a bus, a house, a boat, or even a stage backdrop for theatre plays. Let children explore opportunities and possibilities, encourage them to find new ideas and ways of play. Offer concrete ideas or directions only when truly necessary. Be the mindful, attentive observer who asks open questions instead of a teacher who gives instructions and leads structured and goal-oriented tasks.



6. Involving Parents

Parents are important partners in making TFM successful. Their support helps children feel confident and motivated, while also extending the values of sustainability and creativity beyond the playroom and into their homes and everyday lives. However, parents may sometimes feel uncertain or sceptical, so clear communication, transparency, and inspiration are vital.

Communication and values

Communicate clearly and early and explain the “why”: **Share the goals of TFM** (curiosity, creativity, collaboration, care for nature, problem-solving, improved focus, motor skills, sustainability and eco-conscious thinking) rather than focusing only on removing toys.



Use simple, relatable language: Instead of focusing only on general educational goals and abstract educational and sustainability terms, connect TFM to things that parents already value, care about. This may vary since parents are a diverse group, but in general you can focus on:

- **Creativity and future skills:** Unstructured play develops resilience, flexibility, and problem-solving, preparing children for school and life.
- **Eco-consciousness:** TFM reduces waste, avoids consumerism, and teaches children to care for the planet.
- **Well-being and relationships:** Toy-free play fosters social and emotional skills, teamwork, and better peer relationships.

Sample messages for parents:

- *Children will learn to play together, cooperate and use their imagination and creativity.*
- *This helps them learn through challenges and they can become resourceful and confident problem-solvers.*
- *We're supporting environmental awareness in playful and meaningful ways.*

Approach parents with openness and empathy. Both, children and parents, need reassurance. Acknowledge their concerns, listen actively, and frame TFM as a partnership and an adventure they and their children can share.

Address common concerns upfront: Prepare for possible questions and reluctant behaviour. Give them space and time to think about the TFM and create a safe atmosphere where parents can share their concerns.

Prepare answers for the questions you expect to hear from parents, e. g.:

- *Will my child miss their toys?*
- *How will you handle unpleasant emotions of children?*
- *How safe is it to bring these materials into the playroom?*





Explain the process and **emphasize that children will be supported, safe, and engaged.** Share good and successful outcomes of other similar activities, programs or practices from your own or other kindergartens (see also chapters 6 and 7 – presentation of the TFM practice in kindergartens in Slovenia and Austria).

Be creative in informing parents:

- Organize interactive sessions or DIY workshops where children and parents create toys together from scratch.
- Send a friendly letter or invitation to join TFM, crafted together with children.
- Encourage parents to view TFM as an opportunity to share learning, creativity, and fun with their children.

- Organize a parent-teacher meeting (or individual “conversational minutes”) to invite parents to reflect on their children. Ask questions such as: *“What do you hope your child will learn?”*, *“What are your child’s strengths and virtues, and in which areas could they grow further?”*. Use these reflections to highlight the value of observing children during open-ended play, and emphasize the importance of the learning process, effort, and creativity rather than focusing only on outcomes. Encourage discussions about how children learn through problem-solving, experimentation, working with others, and learning from mistakes.

Consider possible ways to **encourage parents to embrace the TFM approach** and sustainability practices, not only within the kindergarten, but also at home and in their everyday lives.

Inspiration

Inspire parents to contribute, as they are more likely to support TFM if they feel involved rather than excluded. Teachers have different ways of working with parents, so choose the approach that best suits you and the parents of children from your group. Be courageous to try something new or interesting, but make sure that you feel safe and confident with the approach you choose.

Invite parents to collect safe leftover materials (cardboard, fabric, jars, natural items). Present this as an opportunity to upcycle rather than throwing things away.

If possible, **organise story-sharing events**: Invite parents to share childhood games they played without toys (e.g., jump rope, hide-and-seek, homemade dolls). This connects the TFM idea with parents' pleasant emotions, memories or nostalgia, while offering children the opportunity to learn and connect with their parents differently. You can include TFM ideas, activities and DIY toy-making workshops in the regular parent-teacher meetings, conferences or events (e.g., Christmas bazaar).



Sharing the process and celebrating “small wins” together

Keep parents informed about the TFM practice:

- **Provide weekly updates:** Share photos, short videos, or a “toy-free diary” highlighting what children have created and learned.
- **Celebrate progress visually:** Set up a display board like a “Wall of TFM Creativity” at drop-off/pick-up or prepare small TFM-themed gifts for parents together with the children.

This way, parents can see and appreciate how children are exploring, creating, and thriving through toy-free play. E.g., you can prepare weekly updates (send photos, short videos or a toy-free diary showing what children created and learned) and celebrate progress (create a display board such as “Wall of TFM creativity” to show how children are engaging in toy-free play that parents can see at drop-off/pick-up, prepare TFM gifts for parents together with children).

Encourage parents to reflect on TFM with children, invite them to ask their child:

- *What did you create/invent today?*
- *Who did you play with?*
- *What was the most interesting/curious/new/fun part of your day?*

Think about a parent-child play day:

Host a morning or afternoon where parents join their children in toy-free play, experiencing the fun and creativity first-hand.

Organize a closing event or exhibition

at the end of TFM. It can be a small “Toy-Free Fair” where children showcase their creations and games, play with parents in a way that they guide the process etc. Invite parents and the local community as well (if possible).



7. Engaging the Local Community

Use TFM as an opportunity to **connect with your local community** and to build long-term, meaningful relationships, not only with parents and families of the children, but also with other individuals and local organisations.

Reach out to the community: Seek for partners – ask local businesses, craftspeople, or environmental groups for leftover materials or invite them to present their work and efforts toward a more sustainable future or lead a short workshop for children, parents or kindergarten staff.

Organize a TFM event for the local community: Host an event where you celebrate the TFM idea and principles. Prepare an exhibition of children's creations, demonstration of TFM activities and play, DIY workshops for the creation of sustainable toys.

Build partnerships: Find partner organisations and companies who support sustainability goals and are willing to contribute meaningfully to the education of children. Think about making such events a tradition – encourage local stakeholders to see this as a yearly opportunity for awareness and connection.



6. TOY-FREE MONTH IN KINDERGARTEN DOBRNA (SLOVENIA)



We put cardboard tubes on a chair and dropped little stones and cones through them. We competed to see which one goes down faster. It was so much fun!

(A child from Kindergarten Dobrna)

6.1 TOY-FREE MONTH AT KINDERGARTEN DOBRNA

Gašper Žagar, Assistant Principal for Kindergarten Dobrna

In today's world, where children are increasingly surrounded by pre-structured or catalogue-bought plastic toys, digital devices and flashing screens, experts are increasingly asking: What happens if we take away conventional toys from children for a certain time? We also wanted something different for our kindergarten. Something more authentic, something that would give children the chance to once again become what they truly are: creative, curious, and full of imagination.

That's why we decided to carry out the Toy-Free Month (TFM), a pedagogical practice based on the idea that **children develop the most creativity and social potential when they are required to create play on their own**, without pre-made materials. And let me tell you, this wasn't just a pedagogical decision. It was a decision of the heart, a courageous step outside our comfort zone. A decision to trust our children, and a reflection on what truly matters in early childhood education.

At Kindergarten Dobrna we have been implementing the Toy-Free Month every April for several consecutive years, as part of a broader effort to promote creativity, independence, and intrinsic motivation in children. The TFM is based on modern pedagogical concepts that highlight the importance of symbolic play, free choice, intrinsic motivation, and independent learning (Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Pikler). Using unstructured materials creates an open, developmentally **stimulating environment where the child is a co-creator of activities** and the educator takes on the role of facilitator and observer.



April, the month we chose for the project, was perfect because of its awakening nature. It inspires simplicity and an authentic experience of the world around us, offering many opportunities to connect with the outdoors. Warmer days and blossoming nature provided children with additional stimuli: natural materials, outdoor activities, and numerous opportunities for experiential play in the forest, park, or kindergarten playground. Moreover, April coincides with many environmental and cultural days (Earth Day, Book Week, Health Day), aligning perfectly with our emphasis on minimalism, sustainable thinking, and community culture.

When I first watched children in a nearly empty playroom exploring boxes, cloth, natural materials, and “junk,” I asked myself: *Do we really need all those materials?* Within just a few days, the children learned to cooperate, communicate, invent their own rules, and even create their own toys. **The teachers became gentle facilitators, observers. Everything slowed down. It deepened.**



Every day, the children brought new ideas, leaves, twigs, cloth, and boxes were transformed into whole new worlds. The outdoor environment and our local community became our teachers and co-creators. Exhibitions, events and collaborations showed that a **kindergarten can be the true heart of a community**, a place of connection across generations.

Community Engagement

Our staff believes in the **power of connecting with the local community**. That's why we extended the Toy- Free Month beyond the walls of our playrooms and shared it through exhibitions, events, and collaborations with local associations and individuals.

- The Dobrna Beekeeping Association enabled presentation about bees and the creation of traditional bee panels from scrap wood, which the children decorated using natural dyes.
- With the Tourist Association Dobrna, we landscaped the kindergarten's surroundings and planted a linden tree – a symbol of connection, growth, and sustainability – at the entrance.
- Children's creations from unstructured materials, enriched with their descriptions, were exhibited in the local library and Tourist Association premises.

- A local beekeeper visited to explain the role of bees and demonstrate beekeeping equipment, linking this to the symbolism of the linden tree and ecological awareness.
- At a family event, children and parents worked together in playrooms to create items from unstructured materials. Some were taken home, while others were displayed in the kindergarten lobby.
- The lobby became an exhibition space – in addition to children’s works, we also displayed didactic games made by our professional staff.
- We linked the TFM with the parallel project Cultural Heritage of Dobrna – each class created its own cultural corner using unstructured materials. Playroom facades represented historic buildings in Dobrna, such as mansions, mills, old hotels, and the spa. Children thus explored local history and demonstrated what imagination and recycled materials can achieve.
- In cooperation with the Blažiš Antique Collection and Mr. Polenek’s House of Cultural Heritage, children discovered what life was like in the past and how children used to play without modern toys.

We also shared the project in local media, the municipal newsletter, and online platforms. In the future, we plan to exchange experiences with other kindergartens in Slovenia and beyond.



“ Personal Experience

As the Assistant Principal for Kindergarten Dobrna, I became more deeply involved with the Toy-Free Month through the Erasmus+ project Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners. For me, this project was a turning point. Not only as a headteacher, but also as an educator and as a person, I began to see childhood, play, and the role of the kindergarten in a different light.

I realized that sometimes the greatest gift we can give a child is a space with no instructions, where they are free to imagine the world in their own way. It was a new and enriching experience that strengthened me professionally. I was inspired by how children responded to the new environment, how educators embraced the role of observers and co-creators, and how the entire community supported the idea of open-ended play.



Additionally, the study visit of international partners and learning-teaching activity held in April 2025 hosted in our kindergarten in the scope of Erasmus+ project was truly useful and inspiring. It showed that kindergartens can be innovators in education, if the staff dares to be different, trust children, and value the process over the outcome. Our international guests were impressed by the TFM implementation, the exhibitions, the reflective practices of our staff, and the integration of cultural heritage and play in the natural environment. The project went beyond play; it became a model of best practice in collaboration, innovation, and intergenerational connection.

This project opened doors for future cooperation, exchange of practices, and joint efforts toward higher-quality early childhood education. That's why I can say that I am extremely proud of this TFM practice and project, not only because of its success, but also because of the courage and openness of our entire team. **I'm proud of the team that embraced the challenge, of the children who amazed us with their creativity, and of the parents and community** whose support showed that a kindergarten is not just an educational institution, but a hub of local life.

The Toy-Free Month project at Kindergarten Dobrna proves that children don't need a multitude of toys for quality play. They mainly need **time, space, a safe environment**, and adults who trust them. Through play without structured tools, imagination, cooperation, independence, and intrinsic motivation are strengthened – values that are foundational for healthy psychosocial development. We can proudly say that April 2025 was a month of wealth in our kindergarten, not material wealth, but human, creative, and communal.



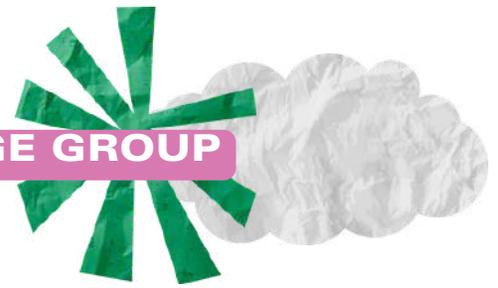
So, I sincerely encourage you to try the TFM practice. At first, it may feel unusual and you might wonder how the children will respond. But believe me: their response will move you. You'll discover just how capable children are when given freedom. How creative they can be with nothing but imagination, and how wonderfully a kindergarten can become a hub of community life when it opens itself to the world around it.

Toy-Free Month is not just a project. **It's a journey that changes children, educators and families alike.** And if, as a kindergarten leader, you're looking to do something truly meaningful for your team and the children – you won't regret choosing this path.



6.2 TOY-FREE MONTH IN THE FIRST AGE GROUP (1-2 YEARS)

Irena Cesar, Kindergarten teacher, Kindergarten Dobrna



Summary

The Toy-Free Month project can be implemented successfully even with the youngest age group. In fact, it may even be easier than with older children due to the natural curiosity and sense of wonder young children have, along with their joy in exploration. Even just a single box offers the group countless opportunities for play, movement, and sensory discovery – literally with all their senses. Sensory perception is foundational and crucial for understanding the world, especially in early childhood.

This project provides children with the **chance to step outside the usual boundaries and discover new ways to play and create**. At the same time, it reveals to adults how rich and fascinating a child's world can be if only we give them the space and time for imagination. And with proper preparation, children will not miss commercial toys. Although the youngest children may not yet grasp concepts such as recycling, caring for the planet, or reducing waste, they can begin to internalize these values through play with non-traditional materials. Through personal experience and exploration, children learn that play depends not on objects but on their own curiosity and imagination.

Introduction

Any object a child transforms into a plaything during play can become a toy. A child's body parts are their first toys, followed by nearby objects. As the child's play develops, toys become more structured.

For the youngest children, **toys made from natural and waste materials** (paper, plastic packaging, reusable materials) **are particularly meaningful because they:**

- encourage imagination,
- spark creativity,
- arouse curiosity,
- are simple and adaptable for various uses, further promoting development,
- offer safe and engaging experiences,
- stimulate the senses,
- teach cause-and-effect relationships,
- improve motor skills,
- foster fine motor development,
- introduce mathematical concepts,
- enhance spatial orientation,
- expand vocabulary,
- improve concentration,
- strengthen self-image and self-confidence.



STEP BY STEP - WEEKLY THEMES, DAILY ACTIVITY PLANNING AND EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

WEEK 1

Day 1: REMOVAL OF COMMERCIAL TOYS FROM THE PLAYROOM

Children help remove the usual toys and store them in a designated area, promoting responsibility and order. Toys are cleaned and disinfected for future safe use. An ecological corner is set up with simple, illustrative photos depicting themes like ecology, waste, and recycling. Children explore and name elements in this corner, boosting environmental awareness.

Days 2–5: COLLECTING MATERIALS & SETTING UP NEW CORNERS

Parents are informed about the collection of materials via email and with a notice on the bulletin board in front of the playroom. Educators prepare materials in advance for varied activities. Collected waste and natural materials are sorted into boxes and organized in play corners to ensure easy access. **Toys are made with children during activities**, or we make them during rest times. Educators observe spontaneous play, with a special role in guiding young children, who need safety, acceptance, and support.

Playroom corners include:

- **Kitchen Corner:** Equipped with food packaging, safe utensils, and visual materials for symbolic cooking play.
- **Sensory Corner:** Features sensory bottles (with water, oil, glitter, seeds, sand) to calm, entertain, and develop focus and sensory awareness.
- **Construction Corner:** Includes boxes, tubes, reels, and blocks for creative building and imaginative use.
- **Book & Puppet Corner:** Offers books, picture stories, children's magazines, and puppets to promote language, storytelling, and social interaction. Activities include naming materials, story hours, and logical sequencing games.



During this week, focus is placed on **language and social development**. Children explore new materials independently. Educators observe and guide usage. It's important to note that young children often explore using their mouths and hands, so items may get damaged, which is something to accept.

Children's Reactions to the Toy Removal: Young children easily engage with unstructured materials, drawn to varied textures and shapes. These provoke more imagination and creativity than standard toys. Increased cooperation, verbal interaction, and deeper, more meaningful play are observed.



WEEK 2

PLANNING VARIED PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

The focus shifts to **movement and motor development**. Activities indoors and outdoors emphasize solving motor challenges independently. Planning with only recycled materials is more difficult due to safety concerns. Materials must be stable, non-sharp, and safe for climbing, jumping, and similar tasks. Soft, sturdy, and large items are prioritized. Sometimes basic sports props are added to ensure quality and safety.



Popular activities:

- Inserting rolls into box holes to improve grip and coordination,
- Elastic bands for obstacle challenges, Sensory pads for tossing and targeting, Large tunnel for crawling,
- Movement dice for animal motions, yoga, colour hunting,
- Balance games using boxes (e.g “bear walk”), pads on heads, walking lines.
- These games offer movement, cooperation, and joyful space and material exploration.

WEEK 3

FOCUS ON SENSORY EXPERIENCES

The third week highlights **nature through the senses and art**, which are intertwined. Children explore natural materials by touching, smelling, observing, and comparing textures like bark, moss, and leaves, indoors and outside.

Activities include:

- Sensory boxes and paths,
- Sorting natural items,
- Mystery boxes for touch-based discovery,
- Nature walks.

These encourage curiosity, focus, and respect for living and non-living nature.



In art, children express themselves through:

- Sculpting and kneading wax and salt dough,
- Printing with textured recycled items,
- Creating paper collages (enhancing creativity, motor skills, and composition).





In music, they sing children's songs with homemade instruments (e.g., rattles and sticks), developing hearing, rhythm, and joy of group music-making. Children discover that sensory bottles can make music.



In dance, children use scarves to express emotions and move with music, enhancing spatial awareness and connection with others.



In drama, they role-play with handmade puppets, enriching vocabulary, imagination, and interpersonal relationships.



WEEK 4

USE OF DIDACTIC TOYS

This week focuses on **mathematics and fine motor development**.

Activities:

- Sorting materials by colour,
- comparing quantities,
- Matching objects with dots in a “Turtle Game”,
- Memory games for visual recall.

To link math with fine motor skills:

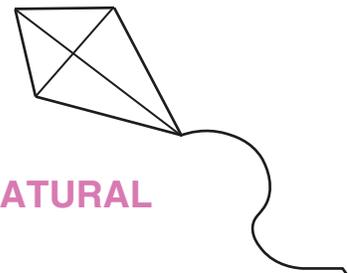
- Filling cardboard rolls with corn to create a tree canopy (precision and persistence), Filling bottles and containers with cones, stones, or nuts,
- Inserting pompoms into egg cartons in “Help the Bees Fill the Hive with Pollen”.



All activities are safe, engaging, and designed to develop counting, comparison, and hand coordination in a playful, natural way.

We try to hold as many activities as possible outdoors, transitioning them from the playroom to the playground. Young children need repetition, so space changes add interest and variety. Thus, playing with recycled materials becomes even more creative and rich.





THE EDUCATOR'S CREATIVITY IN USING RECYCLED AND NATURAL MATERIALS IS CRUCIAL.

Creativity helps recognize the potential for play and learning in ordinary or discarded objects. Instead of relying on purchased and high-structured toys, educators use cardboard, fabric, bottles, buttons, pinecones etc. to create developmental tools that are both interesting and stimulating for children. **This nurtures not only the environment but also children's imagination, resourcefulness, and ability to see the world differently** – promoting sustainability and showing that new isn't always necessary. All it takes is an open mind and a bit of imagination.

My Personal Opinion about the Project

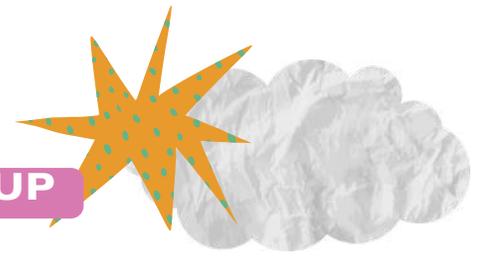
I support and implement the practice of Toy-Free Month because it brings children closer to the essence of play – imagination, exploration, and connection. Through this approach, I've seen how children, especially in the first age group, naturally gravitate toward open-ended materials that stimulate their senses and creativity. Without the structure and expectation of commercial toys, their play becomes richer, more cooperative, and more meaningful.

What I've learned from this experience is that children don't need complex or expensive toys to be engaged or to develop key skills. In fact, with fewer distractions and more natural, waste or recycled materials, they show greater curiosity, persistence, and inventiveness. They find joy in simple objects – a cardboard box becomes a tunnel, a kitchen or a drum. **Their communication, problem-solving, and social interactions also grow in surprising ways.**

This practice has also deepened my role as an educator. It challenges me to be more intentional and creative in designing the environment and activities. It reminds me to observe more, intervene less, and trust in the child's ability to lead their own learning journey.

I recommend this approach to other teachers because it fosters sustainability, creativity, and a deeper understanding of child development. It reduces dependence on consumer goods and encourages a mindset of resourcefulness and environmental awareness both for educators and children from an early age. Most importantly, it brings back the magic of childhood where anything can be something, and every day offers a new adventure in learning through play.

6.3 TOY-FREE MONTH IN THE AGE GROUP 5-6 YEARS



Mojca Krajšek, Kindergarten teacher, Kindergarten Dobrna

Summary

The Toy-Free Month project has been carried out for more than 10 years on a whole-kindergarten level. It started with activities related to Earth protection and later expanded to ecology and sustainability. Over the years, we noticed that children increasingly played less with natural materials and showed a decline in creativity and imagination. In modern educational environments, symbolic and social play is becoming less frequent. Children are less likely to engage spontaneously in cooperative play and show reduced imaginative thinking and creative expression.

One of the main contributing factors is the dominant use of industrially made functionally limited toys. These toys are often single purpose, based on predetermined use scenarios, and do not allow for open-ended exploration, improvisation, or assuming different social roles. As a result, children's play tends to revolve around repeating fixed patterns, which hinders the development of divergent thinking, symbolic play, and social skills – all essential for holistic development.



By removing industrial and commercial toys from the playroom, children are encouraged to explore, create, and learn using natural and recycled materials. **The project helps children understand the importance of sustainability, waste reduction, and recycling through hands-on learning and imaginative play.**

Duration: 1 month with daily activities and weekly themes.

Learning objectives:

- To encourage children to use creativity in making toys and play with objects from natural and recycled materials.
- To develop problem-solving skills through creating and playing with non-traditional materials.
- Establish habits of reducing, reusing, and recycling in daily life.
- To strengthen social interactions and teamwork among children through group projects and play.
- To provide sensory experiences using a variety of natural materials.



Materials:

- Recycled materials (cardboard, plastic bottles, buttons, fabric scraps)
- Natural materials (sticks, leaves, stones, seeds)
- Art supplies Visual aids Sorting containers
- Basic tools (hammers, nails, string)
- Gardening tools (seeds, soil, pots)
- Storytelling books and puppets



Benefits of play with unstructured, waste, and natural materials:

- Encourages creativity and imagination.
- Develops problem-solving and critical thinking.
- Stimulates sensory and motor development.
- Strengthens social skills and collaboration.
- Supports sustainable thinking.
- Fosters intrinsic motivation and prolonged engagement in play.
- Promotes symbolic play and role-taking.

STEP BY STEP - WEEKLY THEMES, DAILY ACTIVITY PLANNING AND EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

This is just one example of how Toy-Free Month can be implemented. Adapt it to your own group based on your children's needs and abilities. Collaborate with the children and allow them to guide the process. This increases motivation and active participation. Your role is to observe and support their exploration.



ACTIVITIES BEFORE THE PROJECT BEGINS

Planning Activities:

- Educational teams within each group.
- Professional team for the older age group.
- Whole kindergarten teaching staff.

Collecting Materials:

- Informative letter to parents. Whole kindergarten teaching staff.
- Conversation with children; ask them to bring recycled, natural and waste materials from home. Collaboration with local companies that produce useful waste (e.g., printers, shops, tailors).

Material Preparation:

- Workshops for parents (e.g., making games, puppets).
- Workshops for grandparents. Teachers pre-sort and prepare materials.

Preparing the Playroom:

- Talk with the children about what Toy-Free Month means and why it's important.
- Clean and store away all the usual toys together with children.
- Clean and prepare the room for new materials.





WEEK 1

DAY 1: INTRODUCTION

- Show videos and pictures about waste, recycling, and sustainability.
- Discuss what children already know and build the knowledge from the known to the unknown.
- Read books or perform a story-based puppet show related to ecology.
- Explain the goals and planned activities for the whole month.

DAYS 2-5: PLAYROOM PREPARATION

- Organize materials by category for easier access.
- Set up role-play corners with the children.
- Let children handle and explore various materials.
- Introduce the concept of waste separation, recycling, and reuse.
- Create sensory paths using available materials.



WEEK 2

CREATING AND EXPLORING

- Start from children's wishes – which games they miss and how they could make them.
- Encourage them to create their favorite toys from the collected materials.
- Offer support and guidance as they explore different construction methods.
- Children make artworks from natural and recycled materials.



WEEK 3

DIDACTIC GAMES AND LEARNING TOOLS

- Introduce educational games made from recycled materials (e.g., sorting games, matching games, memory).
- Use games to teach numbers, shapes, and colours.
- Create learning tools that raise awareness of sustainability and ecology.



WEEK 4

EXPLORING NATURE AND OUTDOOR PLAY

- Explore nature.
- Read books/e-books or use puppets for storytelling on environmental themes.
- Learn about the life cycles of animals and plants.
- Visit an ecological waste collection site.



CONCLUSION

- Sort the materials and dispose of them properly.
- Store the materials that can still be reused.
- Set up an exhibition of children's artwork.
- Children take some of their creations home.
- Inform parents.
- Prepare the playroom for the new month.



CORE AREAS OF ACTIVITY

Language: Encouraging moral and ethical expression, as well as the development of non-verbal communication.

Mathematics: Developing logical thinking, classification, and pattern recognition.

Art: Using a variety of techniques and materials to foster creativity and artistic expression.

Nature: Promoting a respectful attitude toward living and non-living nature and understanding the importance of waste and recycling.

Movement: Raising body awareness, encouraging relaxed movement, and developing motor skills.

Society: Fostering cooperation, safe behaviour, and understanding the functioning of a community.

“ My Personal Opinion about the Project

I have been implementing this project for many years. I was part of the team that grew alongside the idea. Personally, sustainability and ecology are closely aligned with my life philosophy, which is why this topic has also become very dear to me professionally. I admit that in the beginning, it was quite a challenge to bring the topic closer to children and to parents. **The key is to start from the children – their wishes, interests, and ideas.** Only then do they become active participants, eager to explore, discover, and play. All these small steps are leading them into the big world – and we are here to guide them. That, after all, is our mission.





Parents' Opinion on the Toy-Free Month Project

“As a mother of a child attending Kindergarten Dobrna, I am truly impressed with the Toy-Free Month project. I find it extremely innovative and very relevant for today’s world. My son comes home full of enthusiasm, sharing stories about all the exciting activities they’ve been doing at kindergarten – how they’ve been making toys together, exploring nature, and creating things from materials that would otherwise be thrown away. The project hasn’t only influenced him, but our whole family as well.

At home, we’ve started separating waste more diligently, as our son now reminds us how important it is for the environment. He also frequently suggests ideas for how we could reuse certain waste materials – for example, turning packaging into storage boxes or making puppets from old fabric scraps. I love that this project encourages imagination, creativity, and at the same time strengthens environmental awareness from an early age. In my opinion, activities like this are essential for shaping responsible and thoughtful individuals. My sincere compliments to the entire kindergarten team for such an excellent implementation!”



“The Toy-Free Month project is fresh, imaginative, and pedagogically very powerful. I really appreciate that the teachers are finding new ways to encourage children to think creatively and to develop a responsible attitude toward the environment. My daughter often reminds me of what we can do for our planet – from separating waste properly to reducing unnecessary consumption. We’ve had to double-check our recycling routine more than once, because she now knows exactly where everything belongs. What fascinated me most was when she showed me some of the games, they played outdoors using natural materials. She even taught me how pinecones, pebbles, or sticks can be turned into a fun game – and she clearly enjoyed every moment of it. For me, the greatest sign of the project’s success is that children bring these values home and start applying them in everyday life. Thank you to everyone involved in this project for making such a strong impact – not only on the children, but on us parents as well.”



Children's feedback

"I liked it when we could hammer and drive nails like Dad at home."

"I liked it when Andrej and I made a real car, and the teacher allowed us to race around the playground."

"We all have to take care of the Earth, so it doesn't get sick, because I don't like to get sick either."



7. TOY-FREE MONTH IN SCHMETTERLING KINDERGARTEN (AUSTRIA)



The best part was that we came up with everything ourselves. Every day we played different games. And we built a house out of boxes. (A child from Kindergarten Dobrna)

Elvira Lhotka, location manager

Information about kindergarten

- Bilingual Private Kindergarten Schmetterling Dornbach (Vienna)
- 2 toddler groups with 15 children each, aged 1-3 years,
- 1 family group with 20 children, aged 2-6 years,
- 1 kindergarten group with 25 children, aged 3-6 years,
- 15 staff members caring for the 75 entrusted children.

Starting Point & Motivation

In the summer of 2023, we observed that the children were handling toys and various materials for play in the groups quite carelessly. Many were broken, and some books could no longer be used or repaired. As an association, Schmetterling works on themes related to the Austrian Environmental Label, and we have set ourselves the goal of gradually becoming more mindful and sustainable in our interaction with the environment and available resources. This was a key reason for deciding on the toy-free kindergarten.

Another motivation for this project was the summer period, during which we needed to support the children and prepare the space and concept for the upcoming kindergarten year. We planned to spend 8 weeks with the children in a toy-free period, giving them space for creativity and social interaction and to prepare together for the upcoming year. **We wanted the children to consciously conclude the kindergarten year and then welcome the new year in a jointly prepared environment.**



Goals & Competencies

The **goals** we set for the toy-free period were:

- Promoting creativity,
- Recognising that joy in the activity does not require purchased toys,
- Developing own ideas without constant adult guidance,
- Improving communication, as non-prefabricated play and open-ended materials require more engagement with others than games with predefined purpose and rules,
- Enduring boredom and experiencing that something new can emerge from boredom,
- Consciously concluding the kindergarten year and beginning the new one.

The **competencies of children** to be developed and strengthened include:

- Learning to create and implement their own ideas.
- Learning to invent games with other children.
- Having diverse experiences with creative materials (paint, cardboard, sticks, clay, etc.).
- Experiencing that it takes time and patience for things to develop (process-oriented work).
- Being creatively active without adult guidance (and realising that this is possible).

Preparation

After deciding to implement the “Toy-Free Kindergarten” project, we informed the parents about the idea and the plan at the September 2023 parent evening.

In June 2024, we sent an email to parents requesting assistance to bring open-ended materials such as cardboard, sticks, lids, cardboard tubes, etc.

One week before the start, we asked the children about their ideas regarding the toy-free kindergarten during the daily morning circle.

In early July 2024, we began cleaning and repairing the toys with the children, then moved them to our auxiliary building. Different approaches were taken, for example, one group packed all toys into boxes and “shipped” them to different regions (the moon, Mount Everest, etc.), while another group democratically selected materials from a play area daily.



Implementation

In the following weeks, children played with open-ended materials such as blankets, creative supplies, cloths, strings, natural materials, cardboard, yoghurt containers, water, plastic bottles, etc. Additionally, the groups went on more outings into nature and the nearby environment.

Perhaps most noticeably, **many children began to realise**, often for the first time, that there were far more materials and art supplies available than they initially thought. As one boy put it: *I didn't know we had beads.*

They created colourful potions and figures from clay, built marble runs from cardboard, made pirate islands, hiding houses, crawling tunnels, etc. Cardboard was used to try out different painting techniques, with some children sitting inside the boxes to decorate from within. Towers were built from caps and stones using ladders.

In preparation for the upcoming kindergarten year, we **assembled furniture together**, where children learned that it requires a certain sequence and patience. They also learned how to handle tools like Allen keys and screwdrivers.

It was important to us that children could create and implement as many ideas as possible, which was challenging for some staff and children at first.

Some parents were also initially sceptical. Therefore, **we documented the process in the entrance area and posted notices in the respective group rooms.**

Conclusion

At the end of August, the toys that were removed at the beginning of the toy-free practice were collectively returned to the groups. The children discussed where they will place and store these toys in their playroom for future use. The children were then asked how they wanted to celebrate the conclusion. It was decided to have a farewell ice cream party with homemade ice cream.

Finally, parents were surveyed via email about their impressions of the project.

Reflection

Our goals were achieved. We observed that the **children were more creative** during the toy-free kindergarten period and that **social interactions improved** due to the many negotiation processes.

The educators found it easier to observe when the focus was entirely on the children rather than on the activities offered. There were more discussions among the educators, and the reflection on the processes during this time was viewed positively by everyone. We were satisfied that everything went well, as we planned.

What have we learned?

- Settling-in processes during this period are somewhat more challenging.
- Children who are used to being guided and encouraged at home need more time to develop into independent, self-initiated play.
- As educators, it becomes easier to observe what occupies the children. At the same time, it is unfamiliar to step back from an active role and adopt a supportive, observing role.
- Young children need a bit more input from adults (which surprised us somewhat).

“ Children’s feedback

“We crafted with wood, which we don’t do very often. I built something cool – a flip phone!”

“I made pizza out of foil and cardboard.”

“I built a house out of cardboard, and now I live in it.”

“ Feedback from the parents

"My son usually doesn't find painting and drawing very exciting at home. But in summer, he often had a drawer full of new drawings. He also did much more crafting. His favourite activity was role-playing, and there was plenty of space for that now. Although a long kindergarten day is often difficult for him and he's usually happy when he's picked up, he didn't want to leave early or stop playing."

"We are absolutely thrilled. Our child is naturally very creative, but thanks to this initiative, he has been nonstop crafting, recycling, and tinkering all summer. In the afternoons, he just wants to set up a Tonie and cut and glue. Now, no paper scraps are allowed in the trash because there's always a use for them. So, a big success – we'd love to do it again!"

"Incredible how much pride our son takes in bringing home handmade crafts, boundless imagination, and the right use of materials. We also continue this idea at home by making things from improvised materials. At first, we were worried that our son would refuse to go to kindergarten without toys, but in the end, he was simply delighted. And although there's naturally a problem with where to store the crafts, since you can't throw away anything – not even small notes (because they're crystals or money) – the child is now always busy with useful things when he's bored. So, thank you very much for this experience!"

Conclusion and outlook

During the toy-free kindergarten period, a lot of development occurred among children. They worked a lot and showed great **perseverance and creativity in expressing themselves** in different ways. We adults also experienced some learning processes. On one hand, we **sharpened our observation skills** due to the removal of the animator role. Our meetings became more valuable through exchange and discussions about the challenges and impressions that arose. On the other hand, we also **got to know ourselves better** by reflecting on how we personally felt in our roles as supporters and observers.

Overall, we can say that **we all grew through this project** – both socially and emotionally, and in our creativity. It became clear how much children can focus and engage when stimuli are reduced and when they have time to pursue their own ideas at their own pace.

Therefore, in summer 2025, we have built on the experiences from the first toy-free period and integrated the toy-free kindergarten into our pedagogical concept. In exchange with teachers and experts who participated in the international training in Slovenia in April 2025, in the scope of the Erasmus+ project *Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners*, many great sustainable ideas were presented. As a result, there will be a permanent building block construction area in the multi-purpose room in the summer of 2025. Additionally, parents are encouraged to create and bring games from open-ended materials from home, alongside collecting and bringing used materials to the kindergarten.

We look forward to the upcoming toy-free period and can only recommend the TFM practice (and project)!





8. ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR TFM GAMES AND TOYS



I've noticed that my son now starts playing on his own more often. He'll grab a box, a stick, or a blanket, and just start playing something he's made up. Before, he always wanted a toy for everything. Now he often says: "I'll just make something myself."

(Parent – Kindergarten Dobrna)



Superhero Lab project: <https://superherolab.eu/results/>



Ideas for outdoor games: <https://1millionideas.com/25-creative-and-fun-backyard-game-ideas>



Fun Lab: <https://www.facebook.com/funlabapp>



DIY Cardboard Toy: Simple and Fun Tutorial: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19QaZa6Jxj/>



Fishing for Waste (Ekopotencjal, Poland) – Rules and Instructions

Instructions for the Fishing for waste” game:

Make simple fishing rods from sticks and string. Use simple sticks, wooden dowels, or bamboo canes as fishing poles.

Attach a string with a small hook or clip at the end (for safety, you can use bent paper clips or similar blunt hooks).

Wash real waste items, add loops (cable ties), and place them in a blue bag/box = the “ocean.” large blue container, IKEA bag, or blue cloth to represent the ocean.

Prepare 6 bins in the right colors with labels (paper, glass, plastic & metal, bio, mixed, e-waste).

Rules:

- Catch waste from the ocean with your rod.
- Sort it into the correct bin.
- Play solo or in 2 teams – the fastest team to clean the ocean wins, if sorting is correct!

Goal: Clean the ocean, learn recycling, and have fun!



Build a parachute



Catch and sort waste



Overhead projector



**Sound memory - Sensory memory -
Coloured dominoes**



Creative animals

9. LITERATURE



Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U., Cabrera Giraldez, M. GreenComp – *The European sustainability competence framework*. Bacigalupo, M., Punie, Y. (editors), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022. 10.2760/13286, JRC128040. Retrieved from <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128040>

Bogusz, M., Matysik-Pejas, R., Krasnodębski, A., & Dziekański, P. (2021). The concept of zero waste in the context of supporting environmental protection by consumers. *Energies*, 14(18), 5964. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en14185964>

Chang Rundgren, Shu-Nu. (2023). Demonstrating Didactic Models for ESD and Bildung in School Education. *Multidisciplinary Journal of School Education*. 12. 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.35765/mjse.2023.1224.01>

Collins, S., & Garrity, S. (2023). Early childhood educators' understanding of education for sustainable development. *Irish Educational Studies*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2266688>

Kahriman-Pamuk, D., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2024). Nurturing Sustainability in Toddlerhood: Investigating Preschool Teachers' Views and Daily Practices in a Swedish Preschool. *Children (Basel, Switzerland)*, 11(12), 1412. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11121412>

Nian, Z.H. (2024) Book Review on “Children and the Environment: Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development”. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112540>

Pratiwi, H., Ismail, M., Yarliani, I., Riwanda, A., & Islamy, M. I. (2025). Integrating education for sustainable development (ESD) into the Kurikulum Merdeka: pedagogical practices in early childhood education centers in Indonesia. *Environmental Education Research*, 31(5), 920–934. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2025.2462254>

Samuelsson, Ingrid. (2011). Why We Should Begin Early with ESD: The Role of Early Childhood Education. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. 43. 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-011-0034-x>

Santer, J., Griffiths, C., & Goodall, D. (2007). Free play in early childhood: A literature review. National Children's Bureau. Retrieved from <https://rainbow-nursery.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/free-play-in-early-childhood.pdf>

Sharma, S. (2023). Cultivating Pedagogical Sustainability in Early Education. *International Journal of Management Education for Sustainable Development*. 6 (6). 13–23. Retrieved from <https://ijdsdcs.com/index.php/IJMESD/article/view/320/117>

Sneddon, S., & Pettit, A. (2024). Sustainability action in early childhood settings: Incorporating sustainability in early learning, development and wellbeing. *Teaching Solutions*. 2. Retrieved from <https://www.essentialresources.co.nz/Store/Product/Detail/TS0329>

Summers, J. K., Vivian, D. N., & Summers, J. T. (2019). The Role of Interaction with Nature in Childhood Development: An Under-Appreciated Ecosystem Service. *Psychology and behavioral sciences* (New York, N.Y. 2012), 8(6), 142–150.

UNESCO (2020). Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap. <https://doi.org/10.54675/YFRE1448>

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2024). Ecological wellbeing in early childhood. UNICEF Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office. Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/49576/file/EN-Ecological-Wellbeing-Early-Childhood%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/49576/file/EN-Ecological-Wellbeing-Early-Childhood%20(1).pdf).

United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. A/RES/70/1 <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2025). Sustainable Development –The 17 goals. Retrieved from <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

World Sustainable Toy Day (2023). What's the Carbon Footprint of the Toy Industry? (And does the number matter?). Retrieved from <https://worldsustainabletoyday.com/blogs/toy-industry-blogs/whats-the-carbon-footprint-of-the-toy-industry-and-does-the-number-matter>

Zaman, A. (2022). Zero-Waste: a new sustainability paradigm for addressing the global waste problem. In Springer eBooks (pp. 1195–1218). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76505-7_46

Zero Waste International Alliance. (2018). Zero Waste Definition. Retrieved from: <https://zwia.org/zero-waste-definition/>



Co-funded by
the European Union

Toy-Free Month: Cultivating Creativity and Sustainability in Young Learners

Follow or contact us:

Facebook: **Toy-free month Erasmus+ Vrtec Dobrna:**

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61574840853536>



<https://ekopotencjal.pl>

<https://www.instagram.com/ekopotencjal>

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064778013939#>

Email: kontakt@ekopotencjal.pl



<https://www.vrtec-dobrna.si>

Email: vodja@vrtec-dobrna.si



<https://infongo.eu/>

<https://www.facebook.com/infongo.eu>

Email: info@infongo.com



<https://www.erasmuspluscourses.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/erasmusbyprimera>

<https://www.instagram.com/erasmusbyprimera/>

Email: info@skupinaprimera.si



<https://www.step-institute.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/stepinstituteslovenia>

<https://www.instagram.com/step.institute/>

Email: info@step-institute.org

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.