

# TOMORROW TODAY



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# Transforming childhood: from reinforcing consumerism to inspiring sustainable living

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**S**chool is an important influence in children's lives. Most children around the world spend more than 180 days per year in school — typically five to six hours a day — learning basic literacy, cultural norms and societal mores.<sup>1</sup> Some children, for example in Japan, spend more than 240 days in school each year.<sup>2</sup> Formal education is still a central force in shaping children's values, thoughts and ambitions. But in many countries, the media are just as, if not more, influential in shaping childhood. In the United States, children now spend an average of 7.5 hours a day, 365 days a year, engaging with various media.<sup>3</sup> And since US children today are multi-taskers, they're actually cramming nearly 11 hours of media exposure into those 7.5 hours.<sup>4</sup> Each year, marketers spend more than USD17 billion marketing to children worldwide — much of this directed through the media.<sup>5</sup> The media and marketers have become primary caregivers for a large percentage of the world's children today, with parents and teachers playing supporting roles at best.

Unfortunately, the values, information and ambitions cultivated by the media and marketers are often at cross purposes with the educational messages shared in schools — especially regarding sustainable living. For example, while school lessons may regularly discuss the importance of healthy eating, these lessons are drowned out by the presence of vending machines, sweet-sponsored curricular materials in classrooms, unhealthy school menus and the countless advertisements that fast food and sweet companies target at children.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, it is not surprising that marketers have so aggressively targeted children, as children have significant discretionary income

and can play an important role in influencing parents' spending choices.<sup>7</sup> Businesses recognize this and market to them. Some, like The Walt Disney Company, even hire anthropologists to better understand children's interests, hobbies and purchasing preferences, so that their marketing campaigns can be more effective.<sup>8</sup> The unfortunate side effect is that childhood is filled with hundreds of advertisements a day, all of which reinforce a perception of reality that happiness comes through the products and services one buys, owns and uses.<sup>9</sup>

To create sustainable cultures, we need to transform education — and childhood more broadly — so that children no longer grow up learning to be consumers but instead learn to become guardians of the environment and active healers of the Earth's systems. The only question is how to achieve this. In short, there are three aspects of childhood that will need to be addressed. Firstly, we will need to address children's access to the media and what children are exposed to through the media. Secondly, leisure time activities will need to be designed to reinforce principles of sustainability and respect for nature. And thirdly, formal education will need to integrate principles of sustainability directly into all aspects of the educational experience. If these three elements of childhood can be systematically reformulated, perhaps today's children will no longer grow up mimicking film celebrities and rock stars, but instead will strive to be like our boldest environmental and political leaders. And perhaps children will no longer covet the newest 'iGadget' and fashion accessory, but instead work to obtain the next Earth Scout badge and environmental education award. This shift is possible, but it will not come without a concerted effort to redesign three key elements of childhood: formal education, leisure activities and media influences.

## Addressing media exposure

Such a significant amount of time is spent by children with the media, much of the content reinforcing consumerist values and pitching consumer goods, that the first and foremost task will be to rein in marketers' influence over the media and children's total media access.

One of the key tools for this is of course to better monitor marketing to children. Several Scandinavian countries have done so recently and, in the past few years, Spain has become a leader in curbing marketing exposure to its population, first by banning advertisements on its



Image: Leonid Mamchenkov

Watching TV. The media are influential in shaping children's values and preferences

national television stations, and then by banning ads for products that promote the 'cult of body' and unhealthy perceptions of health (such as ads for cosmetics and plastic surgery) on prime time television.<sup>10</sup>

And of course, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control helped to rein in exposure to tobacco marketing in many countries, helping to slow rates of smoking growth.<sup>11</sup> There is strong evidence that marketing stimulates consumption, including the marketing of unhealthy foods with food purchasing preferences.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the recent recommendations by the World Health Organization to limit food marketing aimed at children and to keep schools free of all food marketing are an exciting development.<sup>13</sup> Accelerating this effort will be an important step in reducing total marketing exposure among children, as junk food makes up a large portion of overall marketing to children.<sup>14</sup>

Putting a tax on other, less directly harmful, forms of marketing to children would also be useful, as this would make marketing more expensive and thus reduce total volume. Additionally, this revenue could be used to pay for 'social marketing', which could help counter the effects of marketing and 'sell' sustainable living to children — normalizing sustainability messages while encouraging children to play outdoors, volunteer in their communities, eat healthily, not use disposable packaging and partake in many other sustainable behaviours.<sup>15</sup>

Taxing certain forms of media might also be an effective means of reining in total time spent with the media while also creating new funding to support more sustainable childhood activities. For example, children in the US currently spend 1.2 hours playing video games daily and 4.5 hours watching TV.<sup>16</sup> These are hours of minimal physical activity. Creating a new tax on video games and TV programming could create a new revenue source to fund sports and outdoors activities in schools. The same type of tax could be applied to other forms of media. These small taxes could be a form of 'choice editing' that helps to nudge children to favour one form of leisure over another.<sup>17</sup>

### Redirecting leisure time

Along with using financial tools to shift how children spend their free time, we will need to proactively cultivate leisure time activities that reinforce environmental values and principles of sustainabil-

ity. Toy libraries, museums that teach sustainability and childhood education programmes like the Earth Scouts could all be better integrated into childhood to promote sustainable living.

Toy libraries are one innovative way to help children learn to play together, share and save communities' resources while bringing them closer together. A recent study found that there are 4,500 toy libraries located in 31 countries.<sup>18</sup> These not only provide an alternative to the consumerist childhood where children's rooms are overflowing with toys, but they also help teach important lessons in sharing, reduce overall consumption and help parents screen certain types of toys that are of questionable value. With this simple tool, children can maintain rich childhoods, learn valuable lessons and have a smaller overall environmental impact.<sup>19</sup>

Museums and other informal educational institutions like zoos and public libraries can also play an important role in exposing sustainability ideas and values to children. The California Academy of Sciences (CAS) is one example of a museum that has made this shift — converting its mission to focus on sustainability. This natural history museum not only wants to inspire visitors of all ages to get excited about sustainability and provides many programmes to do this, but it also models sustainability in its very design.<sup>20</sup> Its green roofs, solar panels and LEED Platinum certification are all displayed very publicly in order to show visitors that sustainability is not some utopian dream, but can be readily integrated into daily life.<sup>21</sup> While CAS was helped along in this transformation by an earthquake that forced its redesign, governments can play a key role in accelerating these types of mission updates by providing specific funding to those institutions that want to strengthen their focus on sustainability.

Extracurricular programmes that teach environmental literacy and ecological citizenship can also play an important role in creating fun ways to encourage outdoor activities for children. One of these programmes, the

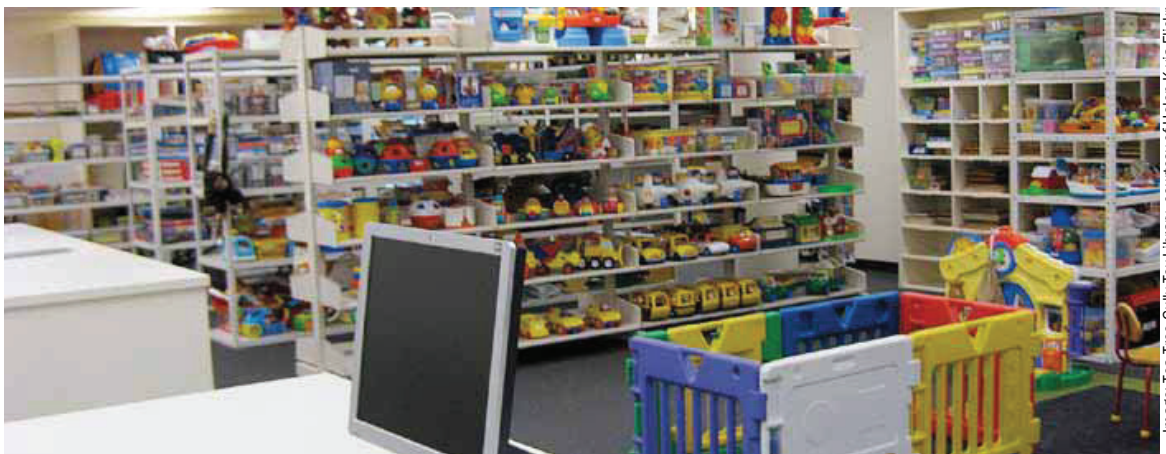


Image: Tea Tree Gully Toy Library, courtesy of Helen K via Flickr

Toy libraries can help children maintain rich childhoods, learn valuable lessons and have a smaller overall environmental impact



Image: Earth Sangha

Young students plant a vegetable garden at their elementary school in Washington, D.C.

Earth Scouts, takes a powerful model — the Boy and Girl Scouts — and updates it for life on a finite planet, putting ecological citizenship at the very heart of the training and philosophy of the organization.<sup>22</sup> Increasing resources and community support for this type of organization could help give children more opportunities to experience the outdoors and better understand the importance of their role as ecological stewards, while also providing exercise, more opportunities to build friendships and community cohesion.

### Sustainability in formal education

Finally, as important as restructuring time out of school, is restructuring time in school, so that all aspects of formal education reinforce sustainability. Transforming school lessons goes far beyond what is taught in classrooms, but to succeed, it will need to include all aspects of the school day, from lunch and recess, to even the very commute to school.

In many countries of the world, people commute to school in a bus or car, rather than on foot or bike. But some towns are proactively changing this. The town of Lecco in Italy, for example, replaced its school buses with ‘walking buses’, and today the town’s 450 elementary school students walk with parents and volunteer ‘drivers’ to their ten different schools.<sup>23</sup> Along with preventing over 160,000 kilometres of driving (and the resultant pollution) since their creation in 2003, these walking buses have played an important part in teaching road safety, providing exercise and connecting children to nature.<sup>24</sup>

In the classroom, teachers will need to prioritize sustainability in their lessons. First and foremost, this will mean tackling business-sponsored teaching materials that can subtly spread a company’s agenda. School teachers, too often starved of resources, end up taking the materials that are available.<sup>25</sup> Finding revenue to provide materials will be an important way to prevent this.

Beyond this will be the more comprehensive effort to integrate environmental literacy throughout all courses — language, maths, sciences, social studies and so on — rather than relegating it to one elective course in school, as is so often the case today. Moreover, as the media are so influential, special care should be made to integrate media literacy into school courses. The good news is that there are now efforts in a number of countries, and by UNESCO as well, to accelerate media literacy programming in schools — efforts that will hopefully grow during the coming years, as over USD640 billion

continues to be spent on advertising every year, making increasing media literacy essential.<sup>26</sup>

Outside of the classroom, particularly in the school playground, schools can benefit significantly from the creation of school gardens. These gardens (and community gardens beyond the school walls) can play a powerful part in reconnecting children to the natural cycles of Earth, and give them a deeper understanding of their dependence on the planet for their survival. Plus, gardens can provide exercise and a direct connection with healthy foods (and more willingness to eat them). Research has also found that time in gardens improves mental well-being.<sup>27</sup> Finally, gardening provides an important skill — one that in the future may be very valuable as the consumer economy butts against the limits of planet Earth and more people return to farming for their livelihoods.<sup>28</sup>

One important part of the school day that is often ignored is lunch. Eating habits are learned from early childhood and providing high-fat, high-sugar foods to children sets them up not just for increased levels of childhood obesity, but also for a lifetime of unhealthy eating. The good news is that all around the world, school systems are working to shift the menus to healthy, local, sustainable foods. Rome is leading the way, with its cafeterias now providing meals to the city’s 150,000 students with ingredients that are now more than two-thirds organic, 26 per cent local and 14 per cent fair trade.<sup>29</sup> While few cities are that advanced, many are starting to tackle this difficult issue. Even Washington, D.C. recently banned flavoured milks in the city’s school cafeterias, which is a good sign for the US capital.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, while working on enhancing childhood experience, we must remember that addressing childhood without addressing the other stages of life will reduce the odds of success dramatically. While working to change the media’s messages to children, we also need to address media messages to all citizens. While adjusting elementary school curricula, extracurricular activities and museum priorities, we also need to work on the teaching priorities of all levels of schooling — from nursery all the way up to university and professional schools.

Imagine if doctors were taught how to prevent illness by teaching patients how to live healthily, or future business leaders were taught that a good business maximizes social well-being, not simply profit. And at the same time, imagine if TV commercials reminded people to eat their vegetables, and magazines like *Fortune* celebrated the Top 100 Business Leaders each year not by measuring their company’s earnings but by how much good their businesses did that year. Education can be a central tool to persuade our cultures to focus on sustainability, but only with significant commitment from educational leaders and support by policymakers and media leaders to support this shift. Only when we can reorient all of these powerful institutions can we hope to live in a culture where living sustainably feels as natural as living as a consumer feels today, and only then can we ensure a sustainable and secure future for humanity.