

Introducing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Handbook for The Early Years



**Introduction by Barbara Isaacs,
President, Montessori Europe**

From the moment of birth, and even before, children are part of ecosystems which support and nurture their well-being, sense of belonging and learning about their environment. Their families and communities create such ecosystems and support their holistic development. In today's world, pre-school experiences at childminders, nurseries, kindergartens or daycare centres are a vital element of these systems and nurture curiosity, offer new ideas and plant seeds of later understanding of our planet and how it functions.

Montessori Europe has partnered with the Flourish Project to explore ways of introducing the concept of sustainability to young children. We believe that the first six years of life are the ideal time for such an introduction – because young children are capable of absorbing, grappling with, expressing and sharing their understanding of big ideas. More than a hundred years ago, Montessori herself voiced this fact when she identified the first six years of life as the time 'when the mind is most absorbent and capable of learning far more than we give it a credit for' (1949). Alison Gopnik and colleagues' (2009) research confirmed that babies are far smarter than we think.

As an ecosystemic framework, the Flourish Model encompasses all 17 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and puts the wellbeing of the child firmly at the centre of the system.

We would like to invite educators and parents to help plant seeds of social awareness, solidarity and care for our planet and its people in young children's learning. By identifying key aspects of the individual SDGs, we provide mirrors for the children which reflect their own joy, curiosity, well-being and sense of self. We also offer windows into the wider world and to lives of other children and communities, providing foundations for a sense of global belonging.

Montessori saw the child as a key agent of change. It is our view that we need to nurture this agency by offering children experiences and activities which will promote positive attitudes of care, respect and responsibility. As educators of young children, the first steps in our journey are to examine our own values and worldviews and to model those we wish to see in the world. We also need to share our approaches with parents to ensure that the powerful messages of the SDGs resonate across the immediate ecosystems surrounding the child.

Young children are ready for big ideas, it is our role to prepare the environment which offers time and space to explore them and to hear the child's voice. We hope this handbook will serve as an inspiration and that the suggested activities will be shared with joy and curiosity. The children of today are our future.

"We are delighted to be partnering with Montessori Europe in promoting young children as powerful change agents." Wendy Ellyatt, Flourish Project

Incorporating the SDGs in The Early Years settings



"We think that among the innumerable agents which participated in this creation, man has had, and has, a very important task. Also that creation is not finished and that the one agent which as yet has not been taken into consideration has been the child . . . The whole world must become one nation." - Montessori, India Lecture, 1944

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all, as they seek to address the unique global challenges that we are now facing together. The SDGs were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. They are aimed at all ages, including the youngest citizens.

All children deserve to live in worlds that enable them to flourish

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form part of an integrated system—in that they recognize that action in any one area may affect outcomes in the others, and that ongoing development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.

It is therefore recommended that the SDG programme is carried out over a period of time, such as 2 or 3 consecutive school years, in order to create awareness and understanding, to nurture positive values and mindsets and to ensure that they become part of everyday life.

How to get started

Children's sustainability programmes are available in many countries today. A starting point may therefore be to firstly find out if your country has such a programme and to get onboard with their guidance, where you ultimately would receive certification. If this option is not available, you can still work towards the goals. Support, advice and guidance can be found through further exploring the adoption of the Flourish model, as well as through Montessori Europe's Sustainability working group.

Secondly, you and your team need to choose your first SDG. Initially it can feel overwhelming when one looks into the 17 goals. It is therefore a good idea to identify a goal that fits and works within your own community and to choose that goal together with your team. You might, for instance, live in a country that has a water shortage and where families are already having to seek solutions for this. You can thereby begin to explore SDG 6 Water & Sanitation as your first meaningful area of focus.

Planning

One idea might be to divide the SDG into 3 main themes per school year. Within each theme you can then introduce a weekly sub-topic to break down the goal into smaller parts, starting from the very concrete, and to build on that.

When you reflect upon what has been covered throughout the school year and begin to think about next year's SDGs, you will quickly realise that you have already covered several inter-related elements that had been discussed with the children.

Empowered Youth

The SDGS FOR THE EARLY YEARS is an empowering programme where young children are able to participate in understanding and managing the sustainability of their own homes and schools, ultimately steering them towards greater awareness of our planet and a new and more meaningful way of living.

An effectively implemented programme will have a life-long positive impact on the lives of everyone in the system – the children, parents, carers, families, teachers, local communities and national policymakers.

"Within the child lies the fate of the future."
- Maria Montessori