

# SUSTAINABILITY

*IN ACTION*

IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Sally Sneddon & Anne Pettit

*Acknowledgement of Country*

The authors acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders past and present.

*Disclaimer*

The suggestions in this book are intended as a guide to types of activities and actions that might be appropriate in early childhood settings. The authors recommend that each setting/service evaluates what is suitable for the children and families they work with.

Every effort has been made to accurately and respectfully present information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures, and the diversity amongst them. The suggestions provided for activities and engagement should be considered in the context of your local community.

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Supporting materials to help embed sustainability\*

Ecological footprint image

Social handprint image

Sustainability actions to reduce our ecological footprint worksheet

Sustainability actions to increase our social handprint worksheet

\* To download these materials, go to [www.teachingsolutions.com.au](http://www.teachingsolutions.com.au), locate the Sustainability in Action page and follow the link.

# FOREWORD

The pressing need to take action for sustainability is something people everywhere are becoming more aware of. This is now reflected in the requirements of Australian standards for early childhood education and care.

*Sustainability in Action in Early Childhood Settings* is a thoughtful, practical and innovative resource that will help educators and managers rethink what's possible, even with little free time.

Chapters 1 to 3 introduce sustainability and show how it can be naturally embedded in early childhood settings through curriculum and pedagogy. Chapters 4 and 5 explore, in some detail, ten important 'ecological footprint' and 'social handprint' aspects of sustainability. This interesting information provides a valuable foundation for the actions that are suggested and for many other ideas readers will come up with themselves. Chapter 6 offers strategies that will enable educators and managers to acknowledge what they're already doing in their settings and practices, and to identify areas that need attention. Tools that are provided will assist with planning what the priorities are, and with developing capacity to achieve more over time.

Sally Sneddon and Anne Pettit are well qualified in the area of education for sustainability (EfS). I have worked extensively with both authors through

the Australian Association for Environmental Education (WA Chapter), particularly in establishing the successful Little Green Steps sustainability program for the early years. In this book Sally and Anne draw on their considerable expertise and experience in EfS and show their genuine interest and understanding about what's required and what can be realistically done in early childhood settings. They clearly demonstrate that not only is sustainability important but that embedding it is not difficult: there are sustainable ways to approach everything we do – and just as the issues have an impact on all of us, everyone can make changes for the better in our settings, and in our homes and communities too.

This book is an important and inspiring addition to the resources available to assist early childhood educators to meet and exceed the requirements of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard. It will provide an equally useful reference for pre-service teachers, and lecturers in tertiary institutions as they prepare students for planning and providing quality education and care for young children.

*Dr Jennifer Pearson (President of the Australian Association for Environmental Education 2010–14)*

# PREFACE

'No doubt the next generation of curious minds will make wonderful discoveries that we could barely imagine today. Our present task is to safeguard their future opportunities.'  
-- P. Bizony, *Science: the definitive guide*, 2010

Sustainability has a very natural and exciting place in early childhood education. In writing this book, we've wanted to share the enthusiasm we have for the many possibilities and benefits it offers children, staff and families.

Much of our inspiration has come from early childhood centres that are involved in the Little Green Steps (LGS) sustainability program in Western Australia, and from educators who've shared their experiences and ideas during LGS workshops and other forums. In our research we've also come across many other stories and evidence that show how relevant, easy and enjoyable it can be to put sustainability into action in all kinds of early childhood settings.

Throughout the book we present some background information about aspects of sustainability – showing how it relates to daily life and where some

of the challenges are that make it important for us all to act. We offer suggestions for children's learning – to foster their joy, curiosity, wonder and involvement – and for how educators and other staff can influence the sustainability of their settings and wider communities.

Whether read in full or flicked through in spare moments, we've aimed to provide something for everyone – from those who are already well underway with embedding sustainability in their settings to those who are taking early steps.

Just as we've been inspired by many people and from each other in writing the book, we hope that you'll continue your journey in sustainability with enjoyment and confidence – drawing on your own interests, learning from others trying new things and forming some new habits. In doing this, not only do we each make a difference to our world, we also make a positive contribution to the health and happiness of current and future generations of children.

*Sally Sneddon & Anne Pettit*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Dr Jennifer Pearson provided valuable input in the planning stage. We also thank her for her encouragement, and for writing the foreword.

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We appreciate the many photographs shared by Mim Downes and Jen and Chris Davidson, and the photo opportunities provided by the Aspinall, Follett and Crowcroft families. Our thanks also to Amy Krupa, Vicky Hartill, Jennifer Pearson, Kia Montgomery, Neil Pettit, Meg Aspinall, Andy Gray, Peter Sneddon and Helen Shortland-Jones, and to Mindarie Regional Council and WMRC Earth Carers for individual photos.

The book has been influenced by passionate educators, other professionals and speakers at various events who provoked thought and provided inspiration, especially the dedicated committee and other members of the Australian Association for Environmental Education WA Chapter and educators involved in the Little Green Steps program.

We also thank the Department of Education WA for support for us using the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative Ecological Footprint and Social Handprint images as a basis for those used in this book.

Finally, our thanks to Barney Rivers, Ruth Siems, Tom Kurema and the team at Teaching Solutions.

# YOUNG CHILDREN AND SUSTAINABILITY

Early childhood is a special time – full of discovery, curiosity and wonder – as each child begins to explore the world and the opportunities it might offer.

Young children depend on adults to give them the best start in life, and to make the world they are inheriting from us the best it can be.

## The importance of sustainability for children everywhere

The significance of sustainability to all children is well recognised. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) documents children's rights to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives, and to have healthy, sustainable futures.

In every moment we spend with children we can nurture their curiosity and joy in making discoveries about the world. We can help them to form attachments,

show them how to make healthy choices and give them ways to influence what happens around them. As we do these things, we help lay the foundations for children to live fulfilling lives, and to care for the world and the people they share it with.

Children are also dependent on the choices we make now. They depend on us taking the necessary actions to create the futures we dream of for them. It is also important that we ourselves take the kinds of actions that are needed now to help create the futures we dream of for children.

Through our everyday actions – and by building children's sense of optimism and connection, and their confidence and enthusiasm to be involved – we play a part in influencing how today's children live in our changing world, and how they will each contribute to sustainability for generations to come.

## Remember your childhood?

When you think back to your own childhood, or look at photographs from that time, what are your fondest memories?

Did you love playing in the local park, holding lady beetles, helping in the kitchen or garden, creating things using empty boxes or making cubby houses with your siblings or friends?

Many things have changed over the years, but these kinds of experiences are still enjoyed by young children. Experiences like these also enable children to learn and practise daily living skills, develop social skills, care for living things and understand connections in the world in ways that might not be provided through more structured activities or by interacting with digital technologies.

Our childhood experiences influence our whole lives. If we encourage young children to explore the world in simple and enjoyable ways, and to notice what's happening around them, we are introducing them to some of the things that are at the heart of sustainability. You never know where this learning will take them as they grow and make their mark in the world.



'Meaningful ways need to be found for children to observe, imitate, talk with, and walk alongside adults who encourage close observation of the world around them and who actively demonstrate knowledge of, and respect and caring for, the environment' (Davis & Elliott 2003, p.10).



### Sustainability in early childhood education and care settings

It's exciting to have sustainability take a focus in the national documents for early childhood education and care in Australia.

This shows that our governments, as well as early childhood academics, curriculum developers and professionals, acknowledge the importance of young children beginning to develop understanding about sustainability. It also recognises that early childhood educators have a vital role in shaping children's capacity to develop knowledge, skills and dispositions that equip them to contribute to a sustainable world.

Both the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) require us to embed sustainability in our daily routines and practice. This opens up possibilities that complement many of the things we already do each day in our work with young children.

#### Embedding sustainability in all we do

Saving water, growing our own vegetables or recognising special cultural days can be great starting points for sustainability learning and action, but we can achieve much



more when sustainability is part of everything we do.

We can find opportunities in the ways we plan our curriculum; approach our professional practice; interact with children, their families, our colleagues and the wider community; design and maintain our learning environments; complete administrative tasks and make management decisions.

Making sustainability prominent in our service's statement of philosophy, and in our policies, educational vision and job descriptions helps make it a natural and valued part of all we do. It can also enable us to meet our requirement to demonstrate continuous improvement.

We create healthy and supportive places for learning that benefit children, staff, families and others connected with our settings when we embed sustainability.

'In early childhood settings, sustainability education is about making young children aware of the interdependence of life on Earth in order to live healthily and happily in the present, as well as prepare them for living sustainably in the future' (Davis & Elliott 2003, p.4).



After exploring different types of leaves from local native plants, the children use them with biodegradable Sun Dyes to decorate reusable shopping bags.



Sustainability becomes embedded when we make it 'just the way we do things', like being resourceful in how we source materials we use and conserving paper by printing on both sides.



**Children’s learning for sustainability**

Nurturing children’s curiosity and connections with the natural world, and their respect for all people and living things, provides the foundation for what they learn about sustainability. And rather than focusing on problems or concerns for sustainability, with young children our emphasis is on involving them in things we can all do to make a difference, and responding with openness when they ask questions.

Babies and very young children are constantly learning too, and through watching what we do, hearing us talk about things as we go about our days and participating in the experiences we provide for them, they begin to form early awareness of how we can live respectfully in the world.

What young children learn about sustainability in our settings can provide the basis for them developing interest in and dispositions for embracing opportunities, challenges and innovations for sustainability throughout their lives.

Curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity are identified in the EYLF as valuable dispositions for learning.

What we teach children about sustainability, and how we go about this, can lead them to develop these dispositions and to form approaches to life that will help them respond to our changing world.

Information and resources for sustainability can be found in many easily accessible forms.

**Resourcing for sustainability in early childhood settings**

Everyone in the staff team will have different interests, knowledge, skills and experience that can help us embed sustainability in our settings – and many of these are things we can share through conversations right now! We are likely to be able to build our capacity to incorporate sustainability with support from families, our contractors, and networks in our local and wider communities too.

Information about sustainability is all around us – in newspapers, books and magazines, on television and the internet, and at local councils and libraries. We might also find out more at sustainability events in our communities and through noticing how other people are doing things. As we build our knowledge of aspects and challenges that relate to sustainability where we live and around the world, we can find even more ways to embed it in our programs and practice.

Children themselves can lead us to learn as we support their discoveries about things that interest them. When children ask us questions that relate to sustainability, we don’t have to have all the answers – we’re likely to find there’s a lot to explore and find out together. We can start by using the resources we have around us, and add to these when we can.



In simple ways every day, children can pick up healthy habits that support sustainability. Helping them learn to ride bikes and scooters, and providing space to store them, can encourage children to enjoy using active types of transport – to get to and from our settings and other places.



### SUSTAINABILITY AND THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

The Australian curriculum helps to realise the goals of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) to support school-aged children to become 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens' (MCEETYA, p.8).

The curriculum builds upon the foundations laid by the EYLF, as teachers continue to support children to develop their knowledge, skills and motivation to respond to opportunities and challenges in life, including those relating to sustainability.

The suggestions provided in this book focus on embedding sustainability in early childhood settings, but most can be easily adapted to suit the unique aspects of school curriculums and learning environments, particularly in the early years.



## SOME RESOURCE SUGGESTIONS

### Early childhood sustainability education networks

Some national and state not-for-profit networks that provide information and resources for members and for non-members include:

- Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) state/territory chapters – including the Early Childhood Special Interest Group
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA) – including the Victorian Branch Education for Sustainability Special Interest Group
- Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (ECEEN) New South Wales
- Environmental Education in Early Childhood (EEEC) Victoria
- Queensland Early Childhood Sustainability Network (QECSN)
- Little Green Steps NSW – Gosford, Wyong, Canterbury, Hurstville, Leichhardt, Waverley and Woollahra councils
- Little Green Steps WA – AAEE Western Australian Chapter

### Resources that support sustainability in early years standards and frameworks

- *Eco Smart for Early Childhood: A Sustainability Filter for Quality Improvement Plans* is available to members of ECEEN NSW
- Many of Early Childhood Australia's *National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program* (NQS PLP): newsletters, and books and other resources available through their website address aspects of sustainability
- The federal government's *Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative* (AuSSI) provides tools and networks to engage students in education for sustainability in each state and territory

### The Rights of the Child and Earth Charter

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child can be viewed Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation Inc: [www.childrensweek.org.au/UN%20poster%20Jan%202008.pdf](http://www.childrensweek.org.au/UN%20poster%20Jan%202008.pdf)
- An adaption of the Rights of the Child for early childhood settings can be found at: [www.anglicarewa.org.au/resources/charter-of-children-s-rights.aspx](http://www.anglicarewa.org.au/resources/charter-of-children-s-rights.aspx)

See the reference list for this chapter on page 113 and the calendar of dates related to sustainability on page 112..

# UNDERSTANDING AND TAKING ACTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

## What does 'sustainability' mean?

'Sustainability is the quest for a sustainable society; one that can persist over generations without destroying the social and life-supporting systems that current and future generations of humans (and all other species on Earth) depend on' (DEH 2005, p.27).

Sustainability is often thought of in connection with the natural world, and healthy environments *are* extremely important – we can't live without them. Social and economic aspects of life also influence the world, and together these provide the foundations for a sustainable future.

- The conditions on planet Earth make life possible for the millions of species of plants and animals, including humans, that share the world. The **natural environments** we depend on are sustainable when they are not polluted, depleted or otherwise changed in ways that affect their ability to support all this life.

- All people share the same basic needs, but we experience the world differently through our personal perspectives, and through the social structures we are part of in our families and wider communities. **Sustainable communities** provide for the health of all people, respect diversity, are equitable, and consider the needs of future generations (UNESCO 2010).
- Economies influence the way resources are shared among people at local and global scales. **Sustainable economies** can adapt to change, provide long-term security for people, and do not compromise the health and viability of natural environments or communities (UNESCO 2010).

In small and in more significant ways, everything we do has an influence on these three foundations of sustainability.

Sustainability relies on environmental, social and economic aspects of life being in balance.

## Have you noticed times when people have had different opinions about a particular decision or proposal?

In our workplaces, communities, around Australia and throughout the world, individuals and groups have many different perspectives about what's most important for meeting people's needs.

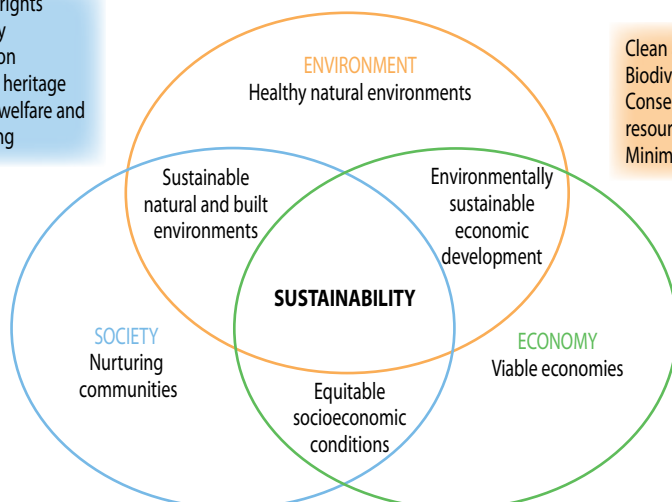
When we look at each perspective we can start to see how complex it is, not only to meet current needs but to balance these with the effects that particular choices or actions might have in the long term.

For example, plans to construct a bypass road around a town might be welcomed by some people – to reduce travel time and congestion on local roads. Others might be concerned about the impact on the viability of the town, or on the native wildlife, habitats and waterways that will be affected. Some people will think the funding allocated to the project would be much better spent on other projects or services.

On a smaller scale, differences of opinion can also arise in homes and workplaces – for example over deciding whether we should spend extra on buying Australian-made products rather than cheaper imported ones.

In any situation there's value in taking everyone's perspective into account. This allows us to weigh up the environmental, social and economic aspects, to make decisions that have the best outcomes all round, now and for the future.

Human rights  
Diversity  
Education  
Cultural heritage  
Health, welfare and wellbeing



Clean air, water and soils  
Biodiversity  
Conservation of natural resources  
Minimal waste

Sustainable production and consumption  
Sustainable growth  
Financial security  
Research and innovation



### What are the challenges for ensuring a sustainable future?

All around the world there are problems for ensuring the sustainability of natural environments, communities and economies. We face serious challenges relating to climate change, loss of biodiversity, degradation of land and waterways, pollution, population growth, human health, inequality, poverty, peace and reconciliation, consumption, competition for finite resources, rapidly changing technology and geopolitical instability (DEWHA 2009, p.6).

We might notice some of these issues affecting our immediate environment, or be aware of their effects in other places – for example, more species extinctions and extreme weather events, food and water shortages, diminishing supplies of fossil fuels, social unrest and global financial instability. We might also hear about the impacts they are having, or will have, on current and future generations.

Throughout life, people contribute to varying degrees, and in obvious and not-so-obvious ways, to these problems. There are many challenges, but we can all help to resolve them.

### We can all make a difference

From individual actions people are taking, to things that are happening in our communities and in government and industry, many of the changes that are needed to secure a sustainable future are underway and gaining momentum.

People are taking actions such as saving water and power in homes and workplaces, preparing to be better equipped to respond to and recover from bushfires, cyclones and floods, voicing support for



Fire has a natural and very important role in Australian landscapes, but with more extreme weather, large, intense fires put animal habitats and people's homes at risk and create social and economic problems for communities.

establishing more marine parks and sanctuaries, supporting local events such as farmers markets, seeking sustainable options in superannuation funds and investments, taking actions for reconciliation, developing more energy-efficient products, and adopting strategies that reduce carbon pollution.

We all have so much to gain from doing what we can to reduce our negative impacts and contribute in positive ways to sustainability. As educators, this can begin with small steps in caring for and educating children, and with noticing what we can do to make a difference in our workplaces – and in our own homes, families and social lives too.

'There has never been a more important time to act for the conservation and sustainability of the planet for the survival and protection of precious species and ecosystems.

Our children have a right to a sustainable future. They will be the policymakers and leaders of the future, so what we teach them now about the environment will directly influence the long-term health of the planet' (Kinsella 2007, p.1).

Research and innovation are improving the design and technology of many things we use – such as washing machines – and this goes hand in hand with individual actions people are taking for sustainability.



**Our ecological footprint and social handprint**

Sustainability relates to so many areas of knowledge and to so much of our lives that there are lots of possibilities for exploring it and making a difference.

The ecological footprint and the social handprint can give us a sense of how we 'leave our mark' – the effects we have and the impressions we make on the world and on each other.

Together they represent ten important aspects of sustainability in early learning environments: biodiversity; water; energy; air and transport; waste; children's wellbeing; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; cultural and social diversity; community and partnerships; and economics.

Having some knowledge about these aspects and the challenges associated with them helps us understand why we need to take action for sustainability. It also enables us to see how we can make choices that have the most benefit in the ways we educate young children and do other things in our settings.

**It's all connected**

Learning about each aspect of sustainability is important, but when we also notice how they relate to each other we are able to see how making a difference to one affects others as well – it's all connected!

Thinking in this way can make us more aware of other connections around us too. The relationships we share with people and the systems we use in our settings and in our communities all provide opportunities for us to maximise the benefits of our actions for sustainability and make them last.



The ecological footprint represents our dependence and our effects on the natural environments that provide for us and all other life on Earth.



We can choose to 'tread lightly' and 'reach out' to do the least harm and the most good in all we do.

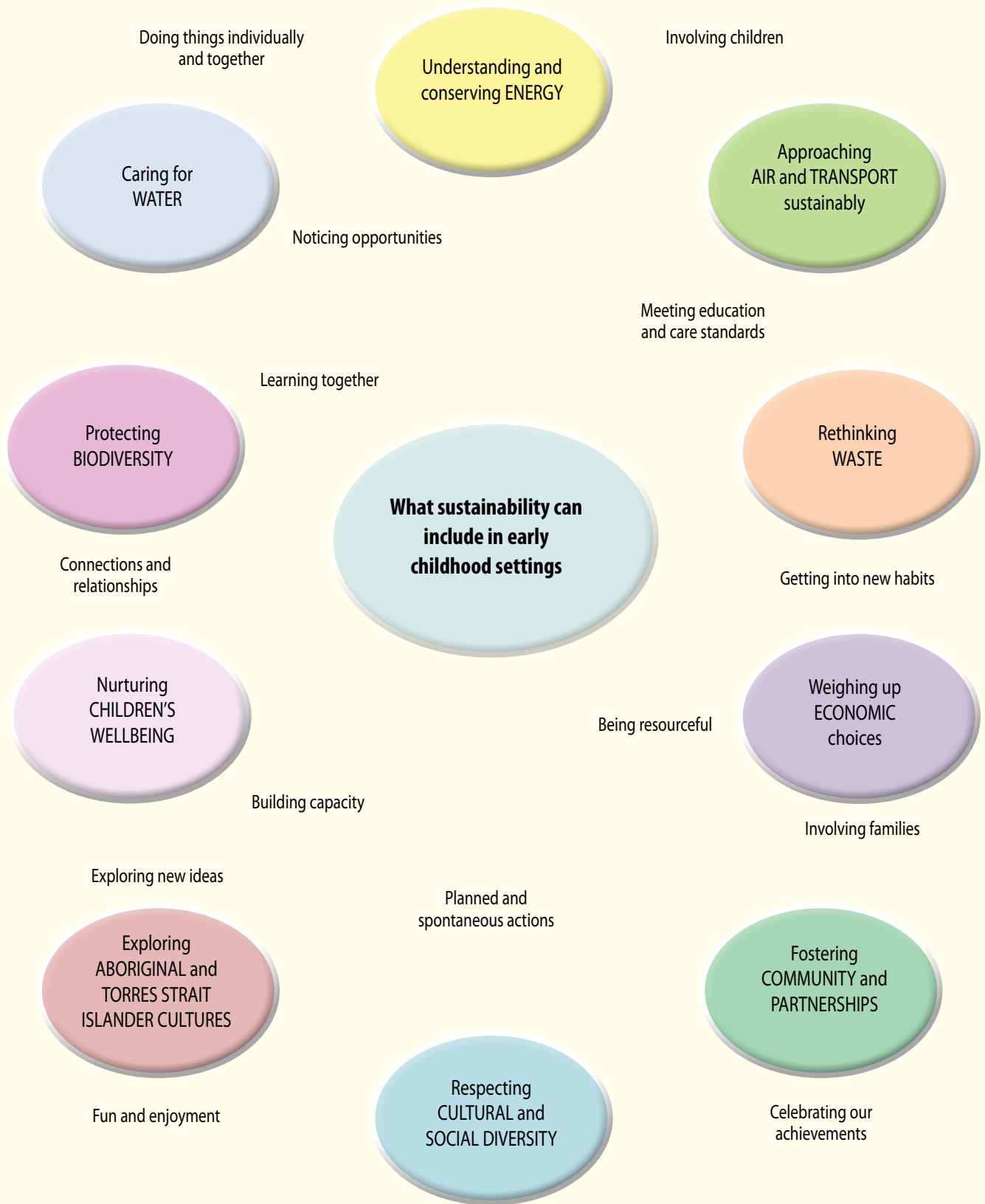
The social handprint is about seeing ourselves not just as individuals but as one of all the people who share and influence the world.

Adapted from the WA Department of Education AuSSI-WA Toolkit

The ten aspects of the ecological footprint and social handprint are explored in detail in chapters 4 and 5. Information and examples provide a foundation for learning and actions from which our interest in sustainability and our capacity to make a difference can grow.

Some of the many connections between aspects of our ecological footprint, our social handprint, and the things we do in our setting that can contribute to sustainability are shown on the next page.

In all types of early childhood settings there is potential to contribute to sustainability through the things we do every day





## SOME RESOURCE SUGGESTIONS

### A few terms to search online

sustainability	sustainable economies	environmental education
environmental sustainability	triple bottom line	economic growth
socially sustainable communities	ecological footprint calculator	population growth
	environmental stewardship	food security

### Some organisations that provide sustainability resources for children

Cool Australia	Green Cross Australia	ABC Splash website
The Gould League	Junior Landcare	Easy Science for Kids website
Planet Ark	Dirtgirlworld website	Early Childhood Australia

Check for kits and other resources that might be available to borrow or buy through local councils, libraries, toy libraries, environmental and cultural groups and centres, science discovery centres, energy suppliers, water and waste services, other early childhood services and schools, national, state and local museums.

### Some sources of information about sustainability

- Federal and state government departments and agencies for Sustainability; Environment; Climate Change; Primary Industries; Agriculture; Water; Social Services; Communities; Heritage; Indigenous Affairs; Foreign Affairs and Trade; Population; Education and others
- Australian Research Institute for Environment and Sustainability (ARIES); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) – Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future website
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO); Environmental Protection Authority (EPA)
- Councils often provide flyers about sustainability actions, services, rebates and/or events, and most have information on their websites. Staff in waste management, environment, sustainability and community development departments can be useful contacts.
- Australian Conservation Foundation; World Wildlife Fund; Greenpeace; David Suzuki Foundation; Oxfam; Do Something Australia; Australian City Farms and Community Gardens Network; My Green Australia; Better Health Channel
- Tanya Ha's user-friendly books, including *Greeniology* (1st edn 2003, 2nd edn 2006), *The Australian Green Consumer Guide* (2007), *Green Stuff for Kids* (2009) and *Greeniology 2020* (2011) – look for these in a local library

### Information and communication technology for sustainability

- Source digital clips from the National Film and Sound Archive; National Digital Learning Resources Network; YouTube (e.g. The Story of Stuff)
- Build your knowledge through TED (Technology Entertainment Design) Talks and apps for smartphones and tablets (search for topics such as vegetable gardening, local species, pest species, indigenous culture, wholefood recipes, recycling, sustainable products).

See the reference list for this chapter on page 113 and the calendar of dates related to sustainability on page 112.