

Raising eco-warriors from two years old

Pre-schools and outdoor adventure schools are doing their part to nurture eco-conscious children, and parents are giving the efforts the thumbs up



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Even though Andre Tan is barely two years old, his father has enrolled him in a pre-school that emphasises sustainability, so that he may grow up to be aware of environmental issues.

His father Nicholas Tan, a 36-year-old deputy general manager of a food manufacturing company, believes it is important for a child to be exposed from a young age, even if he may not understand it now.

“Kids are like sponges. Whatever you tell them now will be the foundation for their future. I believe if you are educated early in the right way, it will impact how you behave and react in the future,” says Mr Tan, whose wife Sharon Tan, 36, is a radiographer.

Andre has been attending KiddiWinkie Schoolhouse’s Jurong Gateway centre since February. It is the first pre-school in Singapore to receive the Building and Construction Authority’s Green Mark Platinum 2023 award.

Its efforts include using heat-reflective paint to repel heat and reduce the indoor temperature, as well as rooftop solar panels to harness solar energy to support the centre’s day-to-day operations.

Aside from its physical infrastructure, the school – part of Babilou Family Singapore, which has 62 education and learning centres in Singapore – aims to teach children about environmental challenges by integrating eco-friendly practices into its centres. For instance, teaching materials are crafted out of cardboard boxes.

Mr Tan likes that the school lets children experience growing edible plants. “If children are introduced to farming from a young age, they are able to see how something grows from a seed to a vegetable, then harvest it. That would help them understand where the food comes from, rather than just buying it off the shelf,” he says.

The school also has outdoor spaces, such as slopes, tunnels and a hydroponic vertical garden to help children develop confidence while learning about sustainability.

Mr Benjamin Busse, chief executive of Babilou Family Singapore, hopes the school’s green learning environment will have a ripple effect. “The pre-school serves as a model for sustainable living for both the children and the community, because the kids will go home and tell the parents what



KiddiWinkie Schoolhouse’s Jurong Gateway centre aims to teach children about nature and environmental challenges. It is the first pre-school in Singapore to receive the Building and Construction Authority’s Green Mark Platinum 2023 award. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

they have learnt,” he says.

Another school, Far Eastern Kindergarten in Gilstead Road, discourages its pupils from using new materials, such as paper, so as not to deplete natural resources.

The pre-school, which won the National Parks Board’s Community in Nature Schools Award in 2024 in the pre-school category for the second time, does not buy paper or craft materials. The biennial award aims to encourage educational institutions to take on a more active role to conserve biodiversity.

Principal Ang Chui Hwa says teachers and pupils have been using scrap or discarded materials to create art pieces since 2009.

“We are known as a ‘karung guni’ school. At the start of every term, the whole school community will collect all kinds of used environmental materials. The children will create something new from all things old in their sustainability journey,” she says.

For instance, table calendars are upcycled into photo frames and scrap books, plastic bottles or milk powder tins become planters, and old T-shirts and other scrap materials are turned into costumes and props for the year-end concert.

Plants from the school garden are given to visitors to teach children to share what they have and that they do not need to buy, adds

Mrs Ang. “If we start sharing the message of sustainability when children are young and keen to learn, it will become second nature to them,” she says.

NURTURING ECO-CONSCIOUS KIDS OUTSIDE SCHOOL

Aside from pre-schools, outdoor activity schools also run programmes in parks to teach children to love nature and hopefully empower them to advocate for environmental sustainability when they grow up.

But before children can be advocates, some first have to shed their inhibitions about the natural environment.

Outdoor School Singapore’s (OSS) programme architect Phang Shu Ann says some children who attend its programmes initially refused to sit down on the ground in the forest, preferring to squat or sit on their bags because they have been taught that soil is dirty.

“To change the children’s mindsets about the outdoor environment, our coaches will ask them questions such as ‘Why is the soil precious? Who needs it?’, leading them to think about the importance of nature for the trees and animals,” she says.

CONTINUED on C2



Garden to table: K2 children harvesting chives grown in the backyard at Far Eastern Kindergarten. PHOTOS: FAR EASTERN KINDERGARTEN



Its pre-nursery children also make organic fertiliser from banana peel from their breakfast bananas.

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FAR EASTERN KINDERGARTEN PRINCIPAL ANG CHUI HWA, on how its teachers and pupils have been, among other things, using scrap or discarded materials to create art pieces since 2009

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Eyolf Lim (left), four, crossing a drain at Dairy Farm Nature Park during a walk as part of Forest School Singapore's camp in June. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Children who attend Outdoor School Singapore's programme gain confidence in navigating different types of terrain and know what to do if they see a monkey or snake. PHOTO: OUTDOOR SCHOOL SINGAPORE



At Nature Explorers School, children learn skills such as whittling. They use only fallen wood to learn to protect the forest. PHOTO: NATURE EXPLORERS SCHOOL

Nurture respect for plants and animals

FROM C1

OSS offers school programmes during term time as well as holiday programmes at locations such as Dairy Farm Park and Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park.

School programmes start at \$85 depending on class size and duration, while holiday programmes range from \$110 for a one-day session to \$430 for a three-day advanced programme.

Ms Phang says children who spend a lot of time on screens and have not been exposed to open-ended resources in nature, such as grass, sticks, branches, trees and rocks, may not know what to do when it comes to free exploration outdoors.

She adds: "When allowed to explore freely, they asked questions like 'What is there to play? It's so boring.' But we ask them in return, 'What do you think you can play? What's interesting here?'"

Through repeated exposure to nature, Ms Phang says children gain confidence in navigating different types of terrain, learn how to identify poisonous plants and know what to do if they see a monkey or snake.

The school, which was started by pre-school chain NTUC First

Campus in 2019, has seen more than 10,000 children attending its programmes as of the end of 2023.

Mr Jenson Ong, 42, who founded Nature Explorers School in 2019, says one of the rules his instructors teach the children at the start of each session is to respect plants and animals.

The school holds weekly sessions as well as holiday camps, at locations such as Clementi Forest and Pasir Ris Park. Classes start at \$65 for a weekday trial lesson to \$370 for a two-day holiday camp from 9am to 4pm.

"Sometimes, kids may not think too much when they hit a plant or try to harm an insect, and so we teach them that these are all living things, just like us, and they get hurt too," he says.

One of the values he emphasises in his programmes is stewardship, so that children learn to care about things that are not theirs.

"It is important to not look at things in a self-serving manner, but to always consider others. Then they will begin to think about the environment and be more motivated and inspired to take care of her," he adds.

For instance, when children learn whittling – transforming natural materials like wooden sticks into swords, bows and ar-

rows – they are taught to use only fallen wood, ensuring live plants remain unharmed.

A pioneer in nature-based education programmes for children is Forest School Singapore, which was started in 2016 by Mr Darren Quek, 34. The school has worked with children and parents as well as schools including international schools and pre-schools.

Even though Mr Quek has decided to close the school in November 2024 to focus on running a course for forest school practitioners, he believes he has made a difference in nature education, a movement which has taken on a life of its own and is being continued by other players.

He says having led an average of 50 to 60 children monthly on adventures learning about nature in the forest over the last eight years, he hopes they have gained self-awareness as well as awareness of the impact their actions have on others and on the environment.

He adds that when children are exposed to nature from a young age and come to love it, the desire to protect it stays with them even as they grow older.

"We plant the seeds. We don't spoon-feed them. The kids who grow up having that interaction

and experience on top of the theory and awareness of climate change, when they grow up, will want to do something to protect the environment," he says.

NEVER TOO YOUNG TO DO THEIR PART

Manager Teo Hui Yi, 43, has registered her two children for OSS programmes since 2021 and during subsequent school holidays so that they could "get more sunlight and fresh air and enjoy the calming presence of nature".

But she soon realised that nine-year-old Elly Pu and six-year-old Rayner Pu picked up important values about preserving the environment along the way.

"When the forest near my HDB block was cleared for redevelopment, my son was upset for quite a while, asking where the creatures living there would go now that their home was gone," she says, adding that the family had hiked in the forest before and her children saw spiders, fishes and birds there.

Another parent, Mr Joachim Kehr, 41, whose five-year-old twins have been attending Nature Explorers School since 2022, says he wanted them to learn about the beauty and diversity of nature in a dense urban environment like Singapore.

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MR DARREN QUEK, whose Forest School Singapore is a pioneer in nature-based education programmes for children

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The regional head and partner at a real estate investment management firm adds: "My wife and I think it's important for our children to understand that there is a wider world out there and that they are a part of it... and that one's actions can have a wider impact, both positively and negatively."

For a start, Mr Kehr notes that his twins display a lot of empathy for animals and plants.

"They understand that plants are living organisms that need food, just like we do. They love animals and our son in particular is a big fan of snakes," said Mr Kehr, whose wife is 43 years old and works in finance.

Far Eastern Kindergarten's Mrs Ang says that, ultimately, when young children enjoy the natural environment, they will see the need to protect it.

She adds: "Most children will be keen to examine a tiny earthworm to check out the wormcast or a sprouting plant, plus they don't mind getting their hands all dirty and wet. On the other hand, adults who have not been exposed to the natural elements will be less interested and affected if earthworms disappear or die on us."