How to Build a Sustainable Nursery That Cares for the Environment

Start with the big picture: why a sustainable nursery matters

A sustainable nursery does more than use eco-friendly products. It teaches children from a young age that their choices affect the world around them. When children see adults sorting recycling, watering plants with collected rainwater, or choosing wooden toys over plastic ones, they absorb those habits. The nursery becomes a living classroom where environmental awareness grows naturally.

This approach also benefits the nursery itself. Lower energy bills, less waste to dispose of, and fewer single-use items all reduce operating costs over time. Parents increasingly look for settings that align with their own values, so a clear sustainability ethos can set a nursery apart. The key is to make changes that are practical, visible to children, and easy to maintain day after day.

Step one: rethink materials and resources

The first step is to audit what comes into the nursery. Look at everything from art supplies to cleaning products. Where possible, choose items that are reusable, refillable, or made from natural materials. For example, swap plastic paint pots for glass or metal ones, and choose washable cloths instead of disposable wipes.

Toys are a big area of focus. Wooden toys last longer, can be repaired, and do not contain the same chemicals as many plastic alternatives. They also feel different in a child's hand and encourage more imaginative play. When buying new toys, check whether the wood comes from sustainably managed forests. Some suppliers now offer toy rental or swap schemes, which cut down on waste even further.

View the location on Google Maps

Paper and card can be sourced from recycled content. For printing, use both sides of the sheet and set printers to draft mode by default. Art projects can reuse scrap paper, egg cartons, cardboard tubes and fabric offcuts. The goal is to model reuse and minimal waste in every activity.

Step two: design the space for energy and water efficiency

The physical layout of the nursery affects how much energy and water it uses. Natural light should be maximised so electric lights are not needed during the day. Pale walls and ceilings

reflect light further, and skylights or large windows help. Where artificial light is necessary, LED bulbs use a fraction of the energy of older types and last many times longer.

Heating and cooling are worth a closer look. Thermostats should be set to a comfortable but not excessive temperature. Programmable timers can turn heating down outside hours. Draft-proofing around doors and windows stops heat escaping. In warmer weather, blinds or awnings reduce solar gain and the need for air conditioning.

Water use can be reduced with simple fittings. Tap aerators cut flow without affecting pressure. Dual-flush toilets and low-flow taps make a difference over a year. Rainwater collected from roofs can water plants and clean outdoor toys. Teach children to turn taps off properly and to report drips so they become part of the solution.

Step three: involve children in everyday sustainability

Children learn best by doing. Give them real responsibilities that match their age. A three-year-old can put an apple peel into a compost bucket. A five-year-old can help sort paper and plastic for recycling. These small actions build a habit that stays with them.

Growing food is one of the most powerful activities. Even a small raised bed or a few pots on a windowsill can produce herbs, strawberries or cherry tomatoes. Children water, weed and harvest, and they see where food comes from. When they eat what they have grown, they are more willing to try vegetables and less likely to waste food.

Mealtimes offer another opportunity. Vegetarian meals have a lower environmental footprint than meat-heavy ones, and many nurseries now offer plant-based options several days a week. Explain to the children why the meal is good for them and for the planet. Simple language works best: "Carrots help you grow strong, and they don't need much water to grow."

Step four: build partnerships with families and the community

A sustainable nursery cannot work in isolation. Families need to understand what the nursery is doing and why. Regular newsletters, noticeboards and open days can explain changes such as the switch to cloth nappies or the new composting system. When parents see the benefits at home, they often adopt similar practices themselves.

Local organisations can help too. Garden centres may donate plants or soil. Recycling centres can provide clean scrap materials for art. Community gardens sometimes offer space for nursery groups to visit. These partnerships strengthen the nursery's place in the local area and give children a broader sense of belonging.

One nursery that has built this approach into its core is Woodland Wanderers Montessori Forest School Rickmansworth. It combines Montessori principles with outdoor learning for children aged 18 months to five years. The curriculum places sustainability and community activities at the heart of each day. Families can book a visit through the Woodland Wanderers website to see how these ideas work in practice.

Step five: monitor progress and keep improving

Track what the nursery is achieving. Keep a simple record of waste volumes, energy bills and water usage month by month. Share the numbers with staff and families so everyone can see the progress. Celebrate milestones such as a reduction in single-use plastic or a successful first harvest from the vegetable patch.

Be prepared to adjust. Some changes will work better than others. A composting system may need tweaking to avoid smells. A new recycling routine may confuse staff at first. Patience and ongoing training help everyone adapt. The goal is continuous improvement, not perfection.

Also watch for greenwashing. It is easy to claim a nursery is "eco-friendly" without real changes. Parents are increasingly savvy and will ask questions. Be honest about what the nursery has achieved and what it is still working on. That transparency builds trust and encourages others to contribute ideas.

What to watch out for along the way

Cost is often the first concern. Some sustainable products, such as bamboo plates or organic cotton towels, cost more upfront. But many changes save money in the long term. Energy-efficient lighting, reduced water use and less waste all cut ongoing expenses. Start with the changes that offer the quickest payback, then reinvest the savings into bigger projects.

Another trap is trying to do everything at once. That can overwhelm staff and lead to burnout. Pick two or three priorities for the first year. Once those are running smoothly, add more. Involving the whole team in choosing priorities builds ownership and makes implementation easier.

Regulation is another factor. Check local rules about food waste composting, nappy disposal and outdoor play areas. Some councils offer free advice or grants for environmental improvements in early years settings. It is worth asking.

Finally, remember that the children are watching. If the nursery talks about sustainability but leaves lights on all night or throws paper in the general waste bin, the message is lost. Consistency matters more than any single initiative. A sustainable nursery is not a destination but a daily practice.

For more information, contact Woodland Wanderers Montessori Forest School Rickmansworth at St Mary's Church, Church St, Rickmansworth WD3 1JE, UK, or call +44 7356 073155.