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FORMING ECOLOGICALLY RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN OF UPPER-KINDERGARTEN AGE IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The problem of responsible human interaction with nature is today directly linked to the strategy of sustainable development: the survival of ecosystems, rational use of resources, and prevention of environmental disasters are viewed not only as the responsibility of scientists or the state, but as a norm of everyday behavior for every individual. In the context of reforms in Ukrainian education, the issue of environmental education of children is gaining particular relevance, as it forms the foundations of the ecological culture of the nation.

Preschool education is increasingly understood not merely as “familiarization with nature,” but as the first stage of education for sustainable development—education that shapes a culture of careful and responsible living. International documents on early childhood development and the UN Sustainable Development Goals emphasize that ecological awareness and behavior patterns must be formed already at the preschool stage, as they later influence the environmental safety of society as a whole [3].

In contemporary Ukrainian pedagogical research, environmentally responsible behavior in senior preschool children is defined as a system of attitudes and actions in which a child: (a) understands basic natural patterns and perceives themselves as part of the natural environment; (b) voluntarily follows rules of careful treatment of living things; (c) participates in practical activities aimed at preserving and improving the environment (plant care, water conservation, maintaining cleanliness, etc.). Thus, the focus is not only on knowledge, but also on internal motivation, emotional attitudes, and stable behavioral habits. Researchers emphasize that children aged 5–6 already demonstrate a sufficiently high level of understanding of cause-and-effect relationships—they can comprehend that litter harms animals, that breaking a branch causes damage to a tree, and that water is not unlimited. Therefore, at this age it is important to form not formal prohibitions but morally grounded personal beliefs: “I do not do this because it is harmful to nature” [2].

The structure of environmentally responsible behavior is typically described through three interrelated components:

1. *Emotional-motivational*: positive emotions toward nature, empathy for living beings, desire to help (“I want to water the flower because it may be thirsty”).

2. *Cognitive*: knowledge about natural objects (water, soil, plants, animals, the sun) and understanding of simple natural relationships (“if you pick all the leaves, the plant may die”).

3. *Behavioral-activity*: real practical actions in accordance with ecological norms (careful treatment of plants and animals, economical use of resources, maintaining

environmental cleanliness, ability to restrain impulsive harmful actions “out of curiosity”).

The integration of these components indicates not merely knowledge of rules but the formation of stable environmentally responsible behavior as a personal norm [1].

This logic directly corresponds to the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Within ESD, the child is viewed as an active participant in sustainable interaction between humans and nature, rather than a passive learner. ESD in preschool education involves forming values of sustainable living, the ability to make responsible decisions, cooperate with others, and act collectively. It integrates three dimensions of sustainability: environmental (care for nature), social (cooperation, empathy, mutual assistance), and economic (understanding limited resources and their rational use). Thus, for a preschool child, “environmentally appropriate” behavior includes not only “do not break a branch,” but also “use only as much water as needed,” “clean up after yourself,” and “treat shared resources with care.” The goal is not simply to provide knowledge, but to develop life competencies for a sustainable and responsible lifestyle [1].

One of the key tools for forming environmentally responsible behavior in senior preschool age is *work in nature*. In Ukrainian preschool pedagogy, this refers to organized joint activities of children and adults in natural settings: caring for plants, watering, loosening soil, feeding birds in winter, cleaning areas, sorting leaves, planting seeds, etc. Unlike purely symbolic play, this involves real actions with visible results and responsibility.

The pedagogical value of such activity lies in the transition from external rules (“this must be done”) to personal responsibility (“I care for this plant or animal”). Research shows that through guided practical activity children learn to:

- plan actions (when and how much to water);
- act carefully (not damage plants or disturb animals);
- complete tasks and observe results;
- cooperate with peers and share responsibility.

These directly correspond to the components of environmentally responsible behavior: emotional (care), cognitive (understanding), and behavioral (consistent action) [2].

The social dimension is also essential: such activities are collective, fostering cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution. Thus, environmental responsibility becomes part of broader social interaction, reflecting the integrated nature of sustainable development (ecological, social, economic balance) [3].

Another important feature of this age is the development of self-regulation. Children aged 5–6 can consciously restrain impulsive actions (e.g., breaking something out of curiosity) and choose environmentally appropriate behavior. This reflects the development of ecological responsibility as a personal trait, linked to the concept of responsible consumption—one of the key principles of sustainable development [4].

An important condition for developing such behavior is a *supportive eco-oriented environment* in preschool institutions. The environment should provide daily opportunities for meaningful interaction with nature—through green spaces, nature corners, recycling materials, eco-trails, and mini-gardens. Without consistent practice,

behavior remains situational; with daily reinforcement, it becomes a stable personal norm [5].

Thus, forming environmentally responsible behavior in senior preschool children is not a one-time activity but a holistic educational process aligned with sustainable development principles. It involves emotional engagement, practical participation, and environmental structuring of daily life. This age represents a critical period for establishing ecological culture, enabling future responsible decision-making in adulthood [6].

As part of a pedagogical experiment, an activity titled “Let’s Help Nature Together” was conducted, aimed at developing a positive emotional attitude toward nature through collective work.

Children cleaned an area of dry leaves, sorted them (for compost and fertilization), and watered flowers. The teacher emphasized: “Flowers, like us, need care. If we help them, they bring us beauty.” Afterward, children discussed their actions.

Most children independently concluded: “We cleaned to make it nice,” “Leaves are useful for the soil,” “I watered the flower so it won’t dry out.”

Such reflection helps transform external actions into internal motivation – “I care because it is right.” These practices demonstrate that sustainable ecological behavior develops through real actions, cooperation, and positive emotional reinforcement.

The formation of environmentally responsible behavior in senior preschool children is a long-term and systematic process requiring daily interaction with nature and a supportive eco-oriented environment. Work in nature becomes not only a means of learning but also a path to developing responsibility, empathy, and cooperation—key elements of education for sustainable development.

Thus, preschool age is a “golden period” for helping children perceive themselves as part of nature and learn to act for its benefit. It is through these small daily actions that the foundation of a sustainable future society is built.

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