

WASTEBUSTER: BEHAVIOURAL PSYCHOLOGY TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE CHILDHOODS

By Amanda Gummer | 19 October 2023 | [Add a Comment \(/article/wastebuster-behavioural-psychology-support-sustainable-childhoods#disqus_thread\)](#)

Wastebuster works to educate and promote sustainability in children. Its programmes include Recycle to Read which works with schools to encourage the reuse and recycling of toys, textiles, tech and batteries. Amanda Gummer, child development expert and play and parenting psychologist, discusses Wastebuster's use of behavioural psychology to influence change.

In today's rapidly evolving world, it is imperative to educate children on leading sustainable lives. [Wastebuster \(https://www.wastebuster.co.uk/\)](https://www.wastebuster.co.uk/) utilises principles of behavioural psychology, nudge theory, gamification and entertainment for social change to instil eco-conscious habits in young minds.

By leveraging these strategies effectively, we can shape the attitudes and behaviours of children towards a more sustainable future. We know that children's learnings and values influence parents' behaviour, so engaging children in sustainable initiatives will ripple out to the whole family.

Katy Newnham, founder of Wastebuster, says: "Never has it been more important to equip children with the tools and mindset to create their own, more sustainable future. To do this, I believe we need to inspire children and empower them with real-world experience to build trust in their ability to make positive change."

Behavioural psychology focuses on observable behaviour and its modification through reinforcement, conditioning, and other techniques. When applied within Wastebuster, it involves identifying and encouraging behaviours that contribute to a more eco-friendly lifestyle.

Behavioural psychology in the Wastebuster programme

Nudge theory, a concept from behavioural economics, suggests that indirect suggestions and positive reinforcement can influence decision-making. Within Wastebuster, this theory is applied to subtly guide children towards making eco-conscious choices.

The Wastebuster programmes employ positive reinforcement to reward sustainable actions. Children are acknowledged and celebrated for their eco-friendly choices through book and other rewards, creating a cycle of positive behaviour reinforcement. Recognising efforts to reduce waste or engage in recycling initiatives can be a powerful motivator. The programmes incorporate achievement systems, where children earn badges, points, or other virtual rewards for completing sustainable tasks are also valuable, especially for younger children. These accolades serve as tangible symbols of their commitment to environmental stewardship.

Children are highly influenced by those they look up to. Wastebuster emphasises the importance of positive role models who exemplify sustainable practices. By showcasing individuals who champion environmental causes, children are inspired to adopt similar behaviours. Wastebuster works with celebrities popular with children such as BBC's Maddie Moate to promote waste and recycling awareness in support for the national Recycle Now campaign, and Chris Packham on Wastebuster's schools citizen science campaign 'What's Under Your Feet' through which pupils explore the link between climate change, changing insect populations and the impact this has on bird migration, with insect data



collected by schools supporting British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) research. Children can form strong emotional ties to animals, plants and their habitats, providing powerful opportunities to connect personal choices around consumption, resource management and the potential positive or negative environmental impacts resulting from our choices.

Designing environments for sustainable decisions

The Wastebuster programme strategically designs environments to encourage sustainable decisions. Seeking to raise awareness of environmental issues, inspire action and provide support and opportunities for practical action by pupils, their schools and local communities to help address these issues.

Initiatives such as the recent [Recycle to Read \(https://recycletoread.org/\)](https://recycletoread.org/) programme – which rewards children for recycling toys – are great examples of this. By setting sustainable options as the default in campaign messaging and supporting schools STEAM linked education resources, Wastebuster nudges children towards making environmentally conscious choices promoting toy reuse and new recycling opportunities for broken hard plastic toys. Additionally, through friendly inter-school competitions and collaborative challenges designed to encourage and reward schools for engaging their wider community, Wastebuster fosters a sense of teamwork and achievement. Access to book and other rewards for schools as a group and to participating community members as individuals, provides both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers for the promotion and completion of target campaign actions i.e. reusing and recycling items/ materials.

Gamification of educational activities

Gamification plays a pivotal role by infusing elements of game design into educational activities. This transforms the learning experience, making it engaging, enjoyable, and motivating for children. Complimentary to gamification are edutainment/ entertainment for social change where environmental messaging can be presented via storytelling, music and art which in turn can help engage children, introduce concepts and form strong emotional connections with children. Gamification can also help link educational activity with the practical implementation of promoted behaviours and help embed behaviour.

'Switch off Fortnight' is one of the first Wastebuster's campaigns to use both entertainment for social change and gamification, including songs and interactive games to promote energy awareness and efficiency behaviours, helping participating schools reduce their energy consumption and bills by 10 per cent on average, along with supporting STEAM education resources and homework activities supporting energy awareness an action in pupil homes as an extension.

The new Recycle to Read programme is taking this to a new level, with the Recycle to Read 'Toys' campaign collaborating with the UK and international toy, children's publishing and entertainment industries to support and amplify campaign messaging delivered in schools by engaging citizens directly using campaign branding and linked messaging delivered via their commercial content. With opportunities for campaign engagement via: schools, retailers, product packaging, children's publications, websites and via streaming service content.

Wastebuster exemplifies how behavioural psychology, nudge theory, gamification and entertainment for social change can be seamlessly integrated to nurture sustainable behaviours in children. This innovative approach empowers young minds to become the next generation of environmentally-conscious leaders, dedicated to preserving our planet for years to come whilst addressing the growing trend of eco-anxiety in children and young people by providing them opportunities to take practical action to help address environmental issues now. 🌱

