



**EARTH  
FRIENDS**

**environmental education  
for early childhood**

# vision, mission & values

## vision

Earth Friends sees a world of stewards who are moving our planet and its people in every direction of good for all beings.

## mission

Earth Friends empowers young children by providing a foundation of education, love, and understanding for our planet and everything it provides us. Children gain a deeper connection to nature, understand their impact on the world around them, and become empowered to make decisions.

## values

- **curiosity:** We approach our work at Earth Friends with an open and curious mind. When we limit ourselves to what is right and what is wrong and only what has been done before, we are restraining the future creators and innovators who can lead us to a better world. We are here to live in a new way and ready to embrace different ideas.
- **sustainability:** As Earth Friends builds the foundation for the future stewards of our planet, we model behaviors and practices that create positive human impact. Sustainability is at the core of our connection with nature and the understanding of how we impact our world. As we teach young children, we, as adults, schools, and centers, will walk the talk.
- **equity:** We recognize that not all young children have access to early education resources, and we aim to create a greener and brighter future for every human and being through Earth Friends Outreach. Our lessons, materials, trainings, and supports are not specific to any one school or community but are accessible to all children in their formative years, which is the goal of Earth Friends Outreach.

# introduction to Earth Friends

## why we need environmental education in early childhood

The youngest generation can rewrite the story of disconnection, distraction, and our diminishing natural world, yet environmental education remains largely absent from early childhood schools, centers, and communities. This is a gap in foundational learning. Today, in the U.S., more than 86 percent of teachers and 84 percent of parents support climate change education in schools, and in recent years this request is being addressed, as we are now seeing climate change and environmental education content voluntarily included in curricula for K–12 across the country, with New Jersey being the first state to make it a requirement.

However, while elementary and high school-age children are receiving this opportunity, **the early education systems and communities are being left out of this narrative.**



If educators agree that these are the formative years—when habits form, behaviors develop, and neuroplasticity is in our favor—then why leave out environmental education in early education curricula? In fact, 58 percent of U.S. parents believe that climate change should be taught as early as preschool, and the February 2022 “Report on K–12 Climate Change Education Needs in New Jersey” identifies environmental education in early education as a Key Need. “Explicit attention should be paid to foundational experiences in preschool learning environments and offerings in higher education to ensure that extends beyond the K–12 arena.”

While it is arguably difficult to teach this subject to young children, when we explore our “why,” the path to the inclusion of environmental education in early childhood education becomes clearer. Why is teaching young children about our natural and built environments so difficult during their formative years, ages 3–6? Well, because the climate crisis is daunting. Because our diminishing natural world is dismal. Because we, the adults, are tired, overworked, and anxious. But that is our story.

**It is not the story of our children.** Imagine if we created an environment where young children can grow to love the world around them and give them the opportunity to make the connections that convenience and culture have stolen from us? Adults may operate from a place of “fight” and “flight” but young minds are eager to “learn” and “love.” This calls for a new approach to environmental education in early childhood that leaves the “adult” climate change topics out of it and focuses on becoming aware of all there is to love about Earth, all living things, and what Earth provides.

### **Specifically, Earth Friends:**

- integrates earth science, biodiversity, ecology, equity, and systems thinking into the current curricula
- builds on existing climate studies (Creative Curriculum’s Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) and nature school philosophies (North American Association for Environmental Education [NAAEE])
- addresses the early education needs for: play-based learning, DAP, SEL, whole-child development, and collaboration in community
- prepares young children for environmental and climate programs designed for older children, such as Earth Warriors and Earth Rangers

To put it simply, **Earth Friends offers young children a foundation of knowledge about where we live and how we live.**

## what is environmental literacy?

We have heard the word “literacy” used often when it comes to reading (the ability to read and write) and more recently math (competence or knowledge in a specific area), but what does it mean when we connect literacy to the environment? According to the North American Association for Environmental Education, environmental literacy is “more than what you know.”

An environmentally literate person, as defined by the NAAEE and National Science Foundation is “someone who, both individually and together with others, makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the well-being of other individuals, societies, and the global environment, and participates in civic life.”

Through environmental awareness, Earth Friends fosters environmentally literate young citizens.



# Earth Friends program

Our rapidly changing world is a global challenge, and environmental education is a global opportunity to unite a generation beyond race, gender, and geography. The children who become friends with all life on Earth will grow into the stewards of Earth we so need.

Earth Friends is an environmental awareness and literacy program designed for children ages 3–8. The program contains 25 lessons within 5 modules that focus on integration within the current curriculum or community and encourage play-based learning and whole-child development.

## the Earth Friends approach

There are 3 pillars that set Earth Friends apart and above from the current early childhood environmental programs available.

the 3 pillars

integration

self-agency

positivity

# integration

Environmental education and literacy must be embedded throughout our daily routines, interactions, and activities with young children. This requires an integration of both time and space. The duration of Earth Friends is designed for environmental literacy to be a weekly, if not daily, aspect of a child's learning and play.

## **Earth Friends is not a unit of study.**

Each lesson and activity are within the context of a young child's impact on the world around them (their own school, their home, their neighborhood) and within their realm of comprehension. Earth Friends is actual rather than aspirational, asking the school or community to model behaviors.

The school or community's integration allows a young child to engage in these new-to-them behaviors and develop a community of like-minded young children. These children, who have been given a sound foundation and understanding of their environment and their impact on it, will naturally evolve into children who have been permitted the self-agency to be an important part of their world. These are our future environmental stewards and climate activists, our innovators and leaders, our growers and our creators.



**The success of integrating environmental education into the preschool curricula depends on certain criteria including:**

- hands-on, developmentally appropriate activities
- creative and play-based learning
- movement, gross and fine motor skill activities
- repetition of concepts and information through movement, music, and routine
- encouraging community events and initiatives that incorporate families and friends
- instituting sustainable and regenerative routines and practices throughout the operations of the school or early education center
- communicating with parents and families to offer additional resources and activities to coincide with each lesson



## self-agency

When adults discuss climate change or environmental topics, the conversation is rarely joyful or optimistic. Climate change brings out our fear and our anger. Seeing our destroyed natural world is heartbreaking, and climate anxiety is real. Earth Friends does not dismiss these realities; however, we must consider that fear, anger, and anxiety is not the story of our children. This young generation has an opportunity to rewrite the story. Earth Friends educates and introduces children to their self-agency.

The Earth Friends Program begins each module at the most basic level of learning and discovery, and each lesson builds and advances from that point. It is important that Earth Friends Educators approach the lesson material as a learner—adults as co-learners. When adults have all the answers, they can stifle a child’s curiosity or squash their courage to share what they think.

**There are no wrong answers in Earth Friends.**

**Curious Questions** invite the children to explore all angles on every subject through engaged discussions. **Hands-On Activities** and modeling behaviors exercise experience-based learning. **Movement Activities** develop gross and fine motor skills. **Science Activities and Discovery Activities** give the children the opportunity to form and share opinions based on observation. **Creative Activities** encourage interpretation and expression through art.

We cannot simultaneously give children the reins and direct them. Telling children what is right and wrong or how to think and feel further exacerbates the current environmental, sustainability, and equity challenge—how to instill inherent and intrinsic behaviors of awareness and preservation in human beings. Earth Friends is the chance for children (and adults alike) to get to know our planet and to pay attention to our world. To learn about where we live and how we live.

## positivity

As Earth Friends Educators, our role is to lead with love and possibility. While each module touches upon a current global concern—climate change, biodiversity loss, food waste and scarcity, energy pollution, and overconsumption—identifying global concerns is not the objective of this program.

As an example, biodiversity loss is indisputable, but **Module 2: Our Neighbors** does not focus on habitat loss or species extinction. Our Neighbors introduces children to the variety and beauty of all living things, our ability to share our home, and the unique way all life on our planet is interconnected.

Young children do not need to be burdened with our fears. Young children need to be emboldened by their love for what surrounds us and sustains us. Earth Friends asks adults to practice positivity, to see our world through a child's eyes.

As Educators become co-learners, they rediscover the uniqueness of life on our planet, the interconnectedness of nature, the positive impact of human beings, and the kindness of community. Adults, as well, are invited to be in awe of our world and to reinvigorate our own motivations to live more in harmony with all that surrounds us.

**There are 5 tenets designed for Earth Friends to go above and beyond the current approaches to environmental education in early childhood.**

## **the 5 tenets**

**curiosity**

**engagement**

**presence**

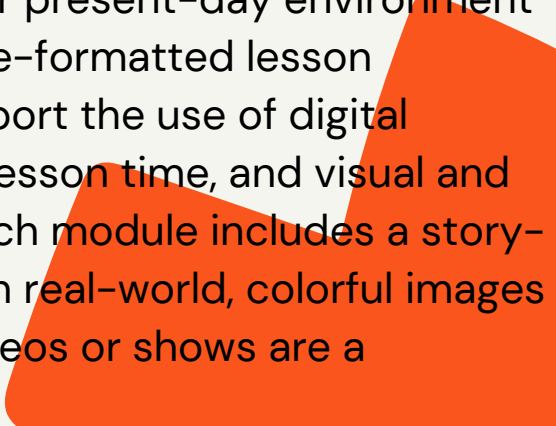
**sustainability**

**equity**

**Curiosity** – Curious Questions are fundamental to each lesson. All answers are accepted and discussed, including a response that may be categorically or statistically wrong. Each answer provides a pallet for thinking and exploration of subjects and scenarios. Very rarely, do we say, “No, that is not right or true.” Occasionally, we can ask, “Why do you think that?” Educators may counter what is known to be false information with questions, but when we limit our teaching to what is right and what is wrong, what exists and what does not, then we are restraining the future creators and innovators who will play a role in humans surviving the climate and biodiversity crisis.

**Engagement** – Earth Friends takes the approach of show and not tell. No matter what the lesson, the Educator’s job is to present materials and information to the children from an unbiased and objective perspective and hold space for the children to explore, question, connect, and possibly problem solve. When in doubt, allow the images in the photo books, the materials in the kits, and any items in the classroom to tell the story.

**Presence** – Earth Friends educates in real time, allowing the children to learn in the context of their present-day environment and their own creations in place of pre-formatted lesson materials. Earth Friends does not support the use of digital devices and electronic media during lesson time, and visual and audio supports are used sparingly. Each module includes a story-time book and a photo book filled with real-world, colorful images that complement the lessons. Any videos or shows are a supplement to the lessons.



**Sustainability** – Earth Friends aims to create a positive human impact on our environment. For this reason, the Earth Friends curriculum includes a limited number of physical resources and materials, and only a select few contain plastic items. All items in the module kits are designed to be used many times over, and outside of the kits' items, Earth Friends Educators are encouraged to reduce consumption by repurposing items or purchasing items second-hand, borrowing items from the school or community setting, or using items found in nature.

**Equity** – While suggested activities are provided to parents and families, nothing is required. Each module encourages the school or community to be the point of environmental literacy practice and integration so that all children will experience the consistency of daily activities and responsibilities as seen throughout the school and the classroom. All children can experience the same activities and witness the same changes, such as, composting a “school lunch” or recycling through a “school crayon recycling drive” or growing food in the “school garden.”



# program structure

**Ages:** 3–8

**Lesson Length:** 20 minutes

**Program Duration:** 30 weeks

**Overall Objective:** Establish beliefs and behaviors in young children that lead to actions of love and respect for our natural and built environment, other people, and their own health and well-being.

## **5 Modules:**

- We Love Our Planet
- We Love Our Neighbors
- We Love Our Food
- We Love Our Energy
- We Love Our Things

## **Each Module Contains:**

- **5 lessons:**
  - Learn (grasping)
  - Understand (integrating)
  - Observe (witnessing)
  - Connect (relating)
  - Love (exercising agency in relation to)

- **Activities:** Such as, hands-on experiences, creative projects, discovery moments, gross and fine movement, and science experiments

- **4 Vocabulary Words**
- **A Community Gathering**
- **Integrated School Activities**

## **All 25 Lessons contain:**

- Curious Questions
- Good Choices
- An Activity (see above)
- Teacher Activity and suggested
- “Throughout the Week” Lesson
- Integrations
- Activities and Discussion Prompts for
- Parents and Families

To bring a very important concept of early childhood learning—music and movement—into this approach, the program includes the “Earth Friends” song, which connects the children to music through lyrics that draw attention to the five modules and encourage movement through American Sign Language.

**You can find “Earth Friends” in the Educator Portal.**

***We are going to learn about the different planets in our solar system. Every planet is special in its own way, and we are going to pretend to be the planets moving around the sun.***

- **SUN:** Our Sun gives us light during the day and all the energy we need to live. Make a C-motion away from forehead with right hand.
- **MERCURY:** Mercury is the smallest planet. Squeeze 2 fingers together to indicate tiny.
- **VENUS:** Venus is the brightest planet. Use 2 hands to fan out from center.
- **EARTH:** Earth is our home and the only planet that supports life. Cross arms in front of chest for hug.
- **MARS:** Mars has the biggest volcano. Form a triangle with index fingers and then make an explosion sign with right hand.
- **JUPITER:** Jupiter is the biggest planet. Move hands apart from center.
- **SATURN:** Saturn is the planet with rings. Draw a ring around right hand with left.
- **URANUS:** Uranus is the coldest planet. Shiver.
- **NEPTUNE:** Neptune is the farthest away. Point far away with right index finger

***sit & learn – 5 minutes***

**Curious Question:** ***What makes Earth special?***

*Allow any answer from the children. Anything can be special to them.*

**Main Lesson:** Earth is the only planet in our solar system where we humans, animals, and plants can live. This makes Earth very special. Earth is not too hot and not too cold. It's just right for life.

*sit & engage - 7 minutes*

## Colors of Earth

- **Name something that is blue.** *Allow the children to name things they think are blue, either in the classroom or outside. When we look at Earth (our planet) from outer space we can see blue. That's the WATER.*
- **Name something that is green.** *Allow the children to name things they think are green, either in the classroom or outside. When we look at Earth (our planet) from outer space we can see green. That's the LAND.*
- **We need land to build our homes on and grow our food on. We need water to drink and to stay clean. We also need AIR. I wonder what color the air is . . .** *Allow the children to name different colors for air. We can't see the air, but we breathe the air to live. And it's full of clouds. Clouds make Earth look white from space. So does the snow on Earth.*



*Use the images  
in We Love Our  
Planet to  
reference colors  
on Earth.*

**Closing Sentiment:** Earth is "*just right*," like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Earth is not too hot and not too cold for all the humans, animals, and plants to live.

*end lesson*



# teachers in the classroom

## TEACHER ACTIVITY

### Earth Friends Pendants

*Paint Earth Friends pendants made of salt dough. Using blue, green, and white non-toxic paint, let the children paint a pendant to look like Earth. Use twine or yarn to hang the pendants in the classroom when finished.*

#### Salt Dough Pendants:

- Mix 2 cups water + 1 cup salt + 1 cup water until a workable dough forms
- Roll out dough to be  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. thick
- Using a cookie cutter or a clean tin can, cut out circles
- Using a straw, poke a hole  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. from the edge
- Let pendants dry out over 2–3 days on a flat surface, flipping every 24 hours. Pendants should be dry to the touch and hard when ready.

Makes 12–14 pendants, double recipe as needed.

Option to prepare the dough outside of the classroom or include children in salt dough activity.

# throughout the week

**Discuss:** that Earth is our home that everyone shares, even if you live in Rhode Island and your grandma lives in California.

**Explore:** other instances of Goldilocks “just right” in the classroom, such as: water temperature, balancing blocks, fitting shapes together, what fits in a box.

**Create:** a space in the classroom to hang the Earth Friends pendants.

**Reading:** *Here We Are*

**Vocabulary:** Earth

**Good Choices:**

- I can share.
- When you feel like you can't share, take a big breath of air, or look down at your feet. Remember how we all share our air and our land here on Earth.
- I can remember what we all share, even when I don't want to play together.

# families at home

**Discuss:** We learned that everyone shares a home on Earth. Talk with your child about who you live with and where you live. You can talk about any city or state or country. You can talk about your neighborhood. Talk about where different people you love live, both close and far away. This helps your child understand we all have different homes all over Earth.

**Visit:** We learned that on Earth water and land are connected and there is air everywhere. Visit a local body of water near you, such as an ocean, a river, or lake, or stream, and see what land it connects to.

**Explore:** We learned that the temperature of Earth is just right, and that is why we can live on this planet. You can explore Goldilocks “just right” in many ways throughout your home, such as bath or shower water temperature (too hot or too cold) or food on a plate (too much or too little).

## **Vocabulary:**

- **Earth** is the only planet where we humans, animals, and plants can live. This makes Earth very special. Earth is not too hot and not too cold. It’s just right for life.

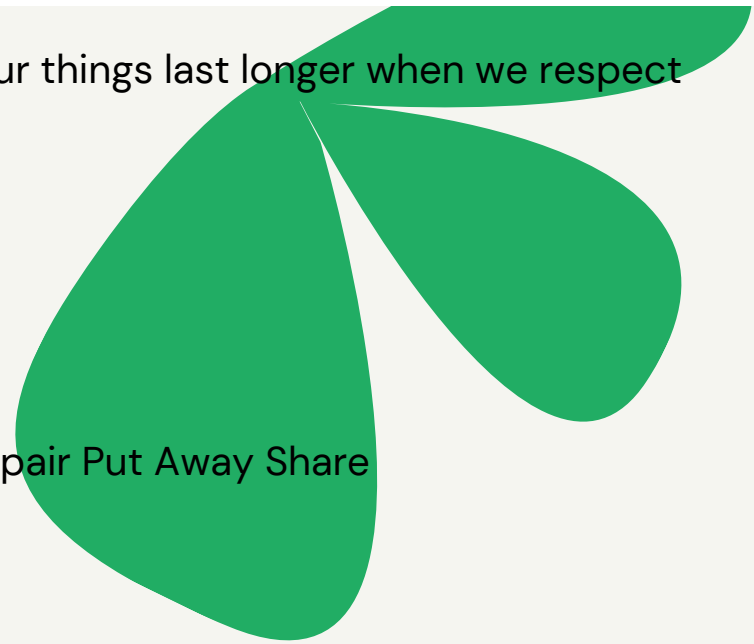
# week 27: OBSERVE

**Objective:** To observe that our things last longer when we respect and take care of them

**Vocabulary:** respect

**Reading:** *Little Blue Chair*

**Hands-On Activity:** Clean Repair Put Away Share



*begin lesson*

*move & discover - 7 minutes*

## Materials Make Things

*Passing around the materials will be repeated at the beginning of each lesson; however, each week the children will be asked to identify or categorize the materials in a different way.*

**Materials Provided: Sample Materials**

Have the children sit in a circle and then pass around the material samples one at a time. **Is it hard or soft? Light or heavy? How does it feel?**

- Wood (plants)
- Plastic (plants or fossil fuels)
- Rubber (plants or fossil fuels)
- Metal (rocks and minerals)
- Textile (plants or animals)
- Glass (sand)
- Paper (plants)
- Ceramic (rocks and minerals)
- Cardboard (plants)
- Leather (animals)

*sit & engage - 5 minutes*

**Curious Question:** What is respect? What happens when we respect our things?

*Allow the children to share where they think materials come from. This can be anything from outside to a store to a factory. There are no wrong answers.*

**Main Lesson:** Humans make many things from natural resources. We don't want to use too much of what we find in nature—what Earth gives us—so we can learn to take care of our things. When we **respect** our things, we can make them last longer.

*move & learn - 8 minutes*

### **Clean Repair Put Away Share**

Using objects in the classroom, create different scenarios where the children can practice respect of their things. Provide the means to “respect” the things so the children can choose.

Examples:

- Clean something that is dirty (from a crayon or spill)—a damp cloth
- Repair something that is broken or in need of repair (paper)—tape or glue
- Put away something that is messy or disorganized (a puzzle)—a box or bin
- Share something that is hard to share (a favorite toy)—a timer

**What can we do with this?** Go through each scenario and let the children decide how they can practice respect for their things in each scenario.

**Closing Sentiment:** Humans make a lot of things from what we find in nature, and we can make our things last longer when we respect them and treat them with care.

*end lesson*

# teachers in the classroom

## TEACHER ACTIVITY

### The Respect Rules

*Sit in a circle and explain to the children that we want to take care of our things and help them last a long time. **How can we respect the things we have in our classroom? Let's come up with a list of 5 Respect Rules for Earth Friends.***

*Once the children come up with a list of rules, write down the list and pin it to a classroom wall or other shared space so everyone can see it.*

*There are obvious examples but take some time (maybe a few days) to see what the children come up with. Let this be their list.*

# throughout the week

**Discuss:** where things come from. Choose 5 materials from the box and talk with the children about what things we can make from these materials.

**Create:** Using any drawing medium, ask the children to draw a natural resource that we use to make our things.

**Reading:** *Little Blue Planet*

**Vocabulary:** material, natural resource, respect

**Good Choices:**

- I can put my things away.
- I can take care of the things I own.
- I can ask before I use other people's things.



# families at home

**Hands-On:** We learned 4 different ways to take care of our things and make them last longer—clean, repair, put away, share. If you find yourself cleaning, repairing, organizing, or borrowing anything, you can share the activity with your child and talk about how this is a way we can respect our things and help them last longer.

Examples:

- Removing a stain on something
- Fixing something that is broken
- Putting things away—dishes, clothes, a closet reorg
- Borrowing something from a family member or neighbor

**Create:** We talked about respect this week and how when we respect and take care of things they last longer. And when our things last longer, we don't have to use more natural resources from Earth to make new things. The children made The Respect Rules, 5 rules for respecting things in our classroom. You can make The Respect Rules for things in your home too. Have your child suggest ways you can respect the things in your house. What are ways you want to respect the things in your house to make them last longer?

**Visit:** a secondhand shop. This is a store for things that other people have already used, but since they have been taken care of, they can be new to someone else. Walk around and talk about what the different things are made out of. Is there something your child wants to buy that they will take care of?

## **Vocabulary:**

- Humans make all different kinds of things made out of different **materials**.
- The materials we use to make our things are found in nature, like trees and rocks, and we call these natural resources. Some come from underground, like fossil fuels, rocks, and minerals. Some come from plants, like trees and leaves. Some come from animals. We create all our materials from **natural resources**.
- Humans make many things from natural resources. We don't want to use too much of what we find in nature—what Earth gives us—so we can learn to take care of our things. When we **respect** our things, we can make them last longer.