Eco-Tots Cymru

Creating a Zero Waste Shop in your Setting



Learning objectives:

To understand what a zero-waste refill station is and how it helps reduce single use plastic packaging.

To explore how an early years setting can introduce a refill station on a small and manageable scale.

To recognise how refill stations can support children's learning about reuse, caring for resources, and sustainable choices.

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The Moondance Foundation

Reduce and Reuse

Practitioner knowledge:

Developing children's understanding of waste and sustainability is increasingly important. Excessive waste has a significant impact on the environment, contributing to pollution, habitat loss and increased greenhouse gas emissions through the production, transportation and disposal of goods.

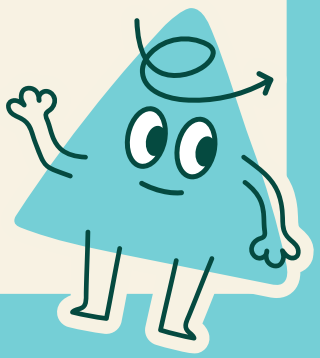
Many everyday items are used only briefly before being discarded, placing pressure on natural resources and landfill sites. Research shows that reducing waste, reusing materials and making thoughtful purchasing choices can help conserve resources and lessen environmental harm.

What is a zero-waste refill station?

A zero-waste refill station is a simple area where everyday items are bought and stored in larger containers and refilled into smaller reusable containers when needed.

In an early years setting, this can help reduce single use packaging, save money, and show children and families simple ways to care for the environment. For example, you might buy one large container of a product and families can bring their own clean bottle, jar, or tub to refill a smaller amount.

This means fewer small plastic containers need to be bought and thrown away.



Starting small

A refill station does not need to be a full shop.

It can begin as a small, practical system for refilling a few regularly used items, while helping children notice reuse, care for resources, and everyday sustainable choices.

Start by deciding what your refill station is for. In most settings, the aim will be to reduce waste from a few everyday items and to model reuse in a safe, simple way for children and families.

Begin on a small scale by choosing just two or three items that the setting already uses regularly. This will make the system easier to manage and review.

You might start with:

- Hand soap or washing-up liquid
- Toilet roll
- Tea, coffee
- Pasta or rice
- Flour, or sugar
- Spice and herbs
- A small basket of clean spare containers for families to use

You can expand to:

- Real nappy campaign – reusable nappies
- Selling the fruit and vegetables that you grow in setting
- Donated tins food items



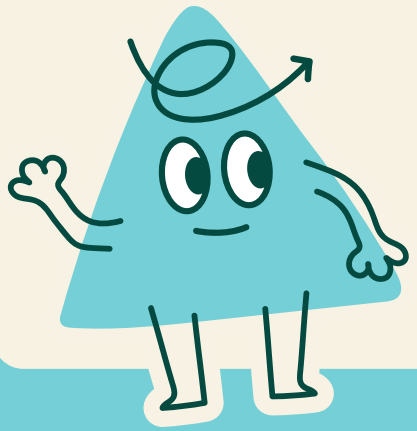
How to begin

Choose a safe, clearly labelled space with containers that are easy to clean, ensuring any products that require supervision are kept out of children's reach and managed by adults. A simple way to start is with a small shelf or trolley containing labelled containers and a few reusable jars or bottles for refilling. Families can bring their own clean containers from home, or the setting can provide spare ones when needed.

The setting may choose to charge a small amount for each refill to help cover the cost of buying products in bulk, making the system self-sustaining and potentially generating a small surplus to support sustainability activities or resources.

After a few weeks, review how well the system is working by considering whether families are using it, whether costs are being covered, and how manageable it is for staff. From there, you can decide whether to continue as it is, introduce an additional item, or invite families to contribute containers and ideas to help the initiative grow.





Learning through practice

Your refill station is great to support learning. Children can greet your customers, help notice when containers need topping up, sort reusable jars and tubs, and talk about why reusing items is better than throwing them away. They can begin to understand that when families refill one container instead of buying lots of separate small ones, less plastic packaging is used overall.

This keeps the idea practical and meaningful rather than introducing it as something too large or complicated.

Examples

For a guide to how zero-waste shops work, what sorts of things they stock and more information, check out this 'beginners guide to zero-waste 'shops':

- A Beginner's Guide to Refill Shops < Honest + Simple

This is also a great example of a zero-waste shop:

- Natural Weigh - Wales' first zero waste shop



Reduce and Reuse