

THEMES LITTER

LITTER

Litter and waste management are mandatory Eco-School themes to be worked on by all Eco-Schools in the UAE. Although the two topics are closely linked to each other, litter is different from waste in that it is best described as 'waste in the wrong place or waste products that have been disposed of improperly, without consent, in an inappropriate location'.

Litter is a problem in most schools and communities. It is a surely a very unpleasant sight when school playgrounds and open areas in a community are strewn all around with plastic bottles, cola cans, used paper, etc. To litter means to throw (often man-made) objects onto the ground and leave them as opposed to disposing of them properly. While most of us are keen to ensure our homes are litter free, not much thought is given when we throw empty bottles or empty packets of chips into the school playground or out of our car.

Litter is always caused by people. Although one could say that nature causes its own litter – for example, dead leaves and twigs from trees – the difference is that this natural waste is usually fully biodegradable. It rots away quickly, enriching the soil and supporting the growth of new vegetation as it does so. Human litter takes a long time to degrade naturally, and can sometimes hang around indefinitely, ruining the appearance of school, school grounds, communities and cities.

Littering has a human impact on the environment and is a serious environmental issue in the UAE. Litter can exist in the environment for long periods of time before degrading and be transported large distances into the oceans.

Litter can also be a health hazard. Food litter can attract rats and flies, which spread disease. Dog fouling in public places (another form of litter) is a serious health risk, particularly for young children. Litter can also be lethal to wildlife. Drinks left in discarded bottles often attract small mammals such as mice which can squeeze into the bottles but are very often unable to get out again. Discarded fishing lines can maim and kill birds. Plastic bags can look like food to some grazing animals like camels, or marine life (especially turtles), can get killed if swallowed.

Type of product	Time it takes to break down naturally
Banana skins, apple cores	Two years
Cigarette ends	Up to two years
Plastic bags	10 to 20 years
Aluminium cans	80 to 100 years
Plastic bottles	Indefinite

The Eco-Schools programme aims at educating students on the benefits of keeping their surroundings free of litter, and pointing out the harms in not practicing these simple civic acts.

By carrying out regular litter surveys in their school and making sure the surroundings are rubbish free, both students and the local community will quickly notice improvements in the school's appearance and image. The involvement of the students in cleaning up the school environment will also help raise a sense of personal pride and responsibility.

What it means for schools

Most schools have a litter problem to some degree. Controlling litter, and making sure that school grounds are cleaned up regularly, is an important priority.

A dirty, dishevelled school can be off-putting for visitors and demoralising for students and staff. Some forms of litter – broken glass bottles and tin cans on the playing field, for example – can also pose a serious safety hazard for anyone using the school grounds.

In terms of the law, all schools have responsibilities to make sure that their grounds are kept free of litter.

What can schools do?

The first challenge on the way to becoming an Eco-School is to aim to reduce litter in the school grounds – permanently! There are four stages to tackling litter in schools:

1. Analyse the problem

Before you start to think about the solution you need to find out more about the problem. The survey activity on the next few pages will help you find out how big your litter problem is and who or what causes it.

2. Devise an action plan

Once you understand the problem you have to think of ways to solve it. Try to involve as many people as possible. Have a session where everybody comes up with lots of ideas and decide which ones are achievable. Your action plan should say what the targets are and how you are going to accomplish them.

3. Measuring success

You must plan from the beginning how you will measure the success of your anti-litter action plan. For example, recording the amount of litter collected and how this has improved over time.

4. Maintenance

Getting rid of litter is one thing but it's quite another to keep it away for good. You will need to monitor the litter regularly and make sure it is cleared up on an ongoing basis.

A Litter Survey

Gather the materials pupils will need to carry out the survey. These are:

- squared/graph paper
- a plan of the school grounds (this should be available with your school maintenance department; if not you can note down the locations where you see litter)
- felt-tipped pens
- a plastic bag
- plastic gloves/litter pickers
- a spring balance
- a notebook

Start by asking students to look for litter in the school grounds and surrounding area. Every time they find some litter, students should put it in the collection bag (first making sure they are wearing gloves or using a litter picker), mark where the litter was on the plan of the school and draw a key to show what kind of litter it was. Students should also keep a tally of each piece of rubbish and the collection time.

At the end of the day, ask students to weigh the bag of rubbish. Make a chart to record the total weight and to show how many pieces of litter were found at the different times of the day: for example, morning, after lunch and at the end of the day. Finally, discuss:

- why and when people drop litter
- how to prevent litter
- differences in the types of litter found inside and outside school
- the areas and places around the school that always look clean and well-cared for, and why this should be
- sources of litter – does the litter come from students, parents or evening visitors, or does it blow in from other areas?

To make sure that your survey produces fair results, choose a day sometime after the school was last swept .

Surveys are best carried out first thing in the morning and after break and lunchtimes.

As a class exercise, decide on the symbols for the survey key. Students can work on the survey in pairs or groups, with a different pair or group carrying out the exercise each day for several days. Compare the results and calculate the average per day, week and year.