

How Do People's Unconscious Attitudes Toward Sustainability Shape Their Conscious Actions Regarding Environmental Conservation? A Developmental Perspective

Luojia Xu

Jiangsu Tianyi High School, Wuxi, 214101, China

Abstract

This article explores the influence of unconscious attitudes on children's conscious actions regarding environmental conservation, particularly from a developmental perspective. By examining early socialization, implicit attitudes, and emotional engagement, the paper highlights how children's unconscious minds shape their sustainable behaviors. Early socialization, particularly through role models such as parents, teachers, and media, plays a crucial role in influencing children's values toward sustainability. Implicit attitudes toward environmental issues, formed through exposure to eco-friendly norms and practices, significantly impact children's future behaviors. Moreover, emotional attachment to nature and animals, fostered by empathy and emotional experiences, further strengthens the unconscious motivation for pro-environmental actions. The paper concludes that understanding these unconscious influences is essential for educators to promote sustainable behaviors in children. By integrating unconsciousness education into curricula, educators can instill a lasting sustainable mindset in students, reinforcing their pro-environmental values and actions.

Keywords

Unconscious Attitudes; Environmental Conservation; Implicit Attitudes; Emotional Engagement; Sustainability Education.

1. Introduction

The unconscious mind has been viewed by many psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and cognitive scientists since its introduction in the 19th century. Famous researchers, including Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schopenhauer, and William James, made dissenting but constructing opinions on the topic of how the unconscious works. Significant ones like Freud's "iceberg metaphor" of mind, which asserts that only a fragment of our ideas and feelings are "visible" to us, while the vast bulk of our mental content is unconscious or "invisible" to everyday introspection (Green, 2019)[1]. Taking Freud's theory as a basis, developmental psychologist John H. Flavell (1999) [2] claims that a developing understanding of consciousness may assist the development of an understanding of unconsciousness and vice versa. Based on these findings, Professor at Dalarna University Borg and her colleagues conducted research on how children can learn about sustainability using the influence of the unconscious. Sustainability is an important concept for environmental protection, and educators are looking for various ways to teach children this concept in their early years. This leads to the question of how children's development of the unconscious mind influences their ideas on sustainability. This article will look at this question through three lenses: children's early socialization, their implicit attitudes and value formation, and children's emotional engagement.

2. Early Socialization

Children are surrounded by many influential role models in society – for example, parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and TV characters. Children look up to a variety of role models to help shape how they behave. All these role models can be potential influencers of children’s attitudes and values on different aspects of their lives, including the ideology of sustainability (AACAP, n.d.)[3]. According to the research done by Assistant Professor in Educational Work at Dalarna University Borg et al. (2017)[4], children’s learning occurs through four different methods – being explicitly taught by others, direct observation, participation in activities, and sharing information from books. The importance of education for sustainability (EfS) is also emphasized in this research. The findings demonstrate a significant and positive relationship between young children’s learning about sustainability and the involvement of exemplary role models, such as teachers and guardians, in sustainability-related discussions and activities, which reflects that children’s unconscious mind on behaving sustainably can be significantly influenced through the integration of EfS and children’s exposure to role models in early years. In this way, children’s socialization with other individuals in their early years can change their ideas and thoughts in their unconscious mind greatly without being discovered and observed directly.

3. Implicit Attitudes and Value Formation

Children’s implicit attitudes on environmental issues will have an influential impact on the formation of their value on behaviors of sustainability. According to research conducted by professors at Vytautas Magnus University Jančius and Gavennauskas (2022)[5], parents tend to give their children a living environment beyond the context of materialism as they seek the good of their children by fulfilling their needs, while also contributing to their education regarding financial literacy and consumption. By using research methods involving filling out a questionnaire and interviewing, participants show an overall support for a pro-environmental worldview, which will lead to the formation of children’s values on behaving sustainably and environmentally friendly. Further on this topic, Professors Paulson et al. (2017)[6] had a conversation on the relationship between conscious awareness and the unconscious mind. In their discussion, they state that consciousness is based on self-report and cannot be very aware. In the cognitive neurosciences, people need to rely on the internal report. Children can gain implicit attitudes through many mediums, including the exposure to media, cultural norms, and the natural environment. All these factors can shape their future sustainable behaviors and decision-making. For example, if a child grows up in an environment where recycling is common, they may unconsciously associate it with “the right way” to handle waste, even if they don’t fully understand the environmental reasoning behind it. It is when the unconscious mind imposes on real-life behaviors. Environmental schemas in early childhood can influence children’s implicit attitudes. For instance, seeing adults treat plants, animals, or natural resources with care can lead children to develop positive associations with protecting the environment.

4. Emotional Engagement

Emotional Attachment Theory in psychology supports the idea that emotional bonds created in childhood influence lifelong behavior (McLeod, 2024)[7]. A child’s attachment to animals or nature can lead to a personal sense of responsibility, which drives environmentally conscious choices unconsciously. Lisa Procter (2015)[8], PhD at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, writes in her book that England’s new education policies give children opportunities to have connections with nature to start EfS. She claims that children are naturally empathetic,

especially toward animals and nature. This empathy can foster a deep, unconscious motivation to protect the environment and adopt sustainable behaviors. For example, a child who feels a strong bond with animals may develop an unconscious aversion to activities that harm wildlife, such as littering or deforestation. Children can intuitively sense that their actions impact other living beings, which motivates pro-environmental behavior at an unconscious level. In addition, according to Killgore and Yurgelun-Todd (2007)[9], strong emotional experiences leave a lasting impression on young minds. For example, experiences like visiting a national park, rescuing an injured animal, or learning about endangered species can create powerful emotional memories that shape unconscious attitudes toward sustainability. The brain's emotional centers, particularly the amygdala, play a big role in processing these memories. When emotional responses are tied to environmental topics, these experiences become embedded in long-term memory. As a result, even subtle reminders (like seeing a recycling bin) can unconsciously trigger these memories, reinforcing sustainable behaviors.

5. Conclusion

Understanding the unconscious forces that shape children's long-lasting behaviors indicates a potent combination of emotional engagement, implicit attitudes, and socialization. By observing and mimicking the adults and media in their environment, children learn sustainable behaviors through early socialization, forming habits that last even when they are not aware of them. A subconscious foundation that links children's values with ecologically conscious decisions is established by implicit attitudes, which are developed through repeated exposure to eco-friendly standards. Emotional involvement, particularly empathy and awe, creates enduring bonds with nature and reinforces actions that seem rewarding and natural rather than forced. Based on these findings, educators and educational institutes can improve their teaching methods by combining unconsciousness education with daily courses, which will promote a sustainable mindset on students.

References

- [1] Flavell, J. H., Green, F. L., Flavell, E. R., & Lin, N. T. (1999). Development of Children's Knowledge about Unconsciousness. *Child Development*, 70(2), 396–412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00029>.
- [2] Flavell, J. H., Green, F. L., Flavell, E. R., & Lin, N. T. (1999). Development of Children's Knowledge about Unconsciousness. *Child Development*, 70(2), 396–412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00029>.
- [3] AACAP. (n.d.). Role Models and Children. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-and-Role-Models-099.aspx.
- [4] Borg, F., Winberg, M., & Vinterek, M. (2017). Children's Learning for a Sustainable Society: Influences from Home and Preschool. *Education Inquiry*, 8(2), 151–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2017.1290915>.
- [5] Jančius, R., & Gavenauskas, A. (2022). The influence of values and social environment on parents' environmental attitudes: Lithuanian case study. *Sustainability*, 14(20), 13415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013415>.
- [6] Paulson, S., Berlin, H. A., Ginot, E., & Makari, G. (2017). Delving within: the new science of the unconscious. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1406(1), 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13390>.
- [7] McLeod, S. (2024, January 17). Attachment theory in psychology explained. *Simply Psychology*. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>.

- [8] Procter, L. (2015). Children, Nature and emotion: Exploring how children's emotional experiences of 'Green' spaces shape their understandings of the natural world. In Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks (pp. 221–241). https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137415608_14.
- [9] Killgore, W. D. S., & Yurgelun-Todd, D. A. (2007). Unconscious processing of facial affect in children and adolescents. *Social Neuroscience*, 2(1), 28–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470910701214186>.