

## Water and Hygiene: The Centerpiece of a Kindergarten's Programme in Warsaw



Imagine a kindergarten with its entire programme organized around water and hygiene themes. A Vistula Drop (*Wiślana kropelka*) in Warsaw is just such a place. The school gets its name from the nearby Vistula River. Early learning about water and its conservation is especially important in Poland because the fresh water supply and water quality are among the lowest in Europe (OECD). The kindergarten's handwashing, toileting, and conservation lessons are

integrated into a water-related science curriculum for three- to five-year-old pupils. Teachers and administrators are convinced that the three-year programme promotes life-long habits of good hygiene, as well as responsibility toward the environment.

Children learn about water's crucial role in human health through experimentation, songs, art activities, and – most important of all -- through daily hygienic practices, with a focus on handwashing and toileting routines.

Vistula Drop's programming starts even before children reach kindergarten-entry age. When Ania was only two, she and her mother joined "The Spring Club" for pupils-to-be. On the first day, Drop, the kindergarten's mascot, led a tour of the facility.

Afterwards, Ania exclaimed that she liked the toilets best because they were small and “not scary”. She liked the sinks and soap dispensers too because she could reach them.



During future visits, Ania learned to turn on the tap by herself and to turn it off while she “soaped her hands for a long time”. She learned to put water in a cup while brushing her teeth rather than leaving the tap running.

When summer holidays arrived, each child received a fluffy Drop toy to take home. In autumn when they returned as “real kindergartners,” they often used Drop as a comfort toy as they adjusted to being away from their mothers during school hours.

The children frequently conducted science experiments, such as comparing water they collected from puddles, rain gutters, and the river. Ania and her friends discovered that even though dirty water can remove spots, children should not play or wash with it because can cause dangerous illnesses.

Each new discovery brought more questions; but, increasingly, children realized they could find the answers in books and on the Internet. Ania was curious about how sailors wash themselves when they are at sea, so the teacher helped her search for answers on line.



Once Ania perfected her toileting skills and remembered to count slowly to 20 while washing her hands, she became a “Drop Duty Person,” charged with assisting the younger children with their sanitation and hygiene. She reminded them about using the right amount of toilet paper and about flushing and handwashing.

Community involvement enriched the programme. During a fieldtrip to the Municipal Water Conduit and Sanitary Sewer Corporation, the children learned how water comes from the river, is purified, and then flows through pipes to the kindergarten and to their homes.

Every spring the kindergarten celebrates the UN’s World Water Day (March 22) by organizing a festival. Its purpose is for the children to get the community more involved in their conservation, sanitation, and hygiene efforts. One year the children marched to the river with posters and shared their

knowledge about hygiene and conservation with passers-by. Another year pupils performed a play for a neighboring kindergarten. Ania played the part of Vistula Drop. She enacted the adventures of a drop of water under the Earth's surface, in a river, in a cloud, in pipes under the ground, in the bathtub and the washing machine. She giggled loudly when hairy brushes "purified" her in a make-believe waste-water treatment plant.

When Ania moved on to primary school, she and her friends knew a great deal about water. They had internalized basic hygienic habits and followed them consistently. Importantly, they had already learned that they could be effective change agents in their school and their community.