

# Human Ecology Education K-14 — Why and How-To

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## Overview of the Goals of Practical and Theoretical Human Ecology Education.

Human Ecology is a multidisciplinary field focusing on the relationship between humans and their home, natural, social, and built environments. To understand how complicated the interactions are between humans and all the worlds we live in, it draws on sociology, economics, home economics, psychology, biology, and environmental science — it is a mixed bag! In education, the goals of Human Ecology programs vary depending on the school and their program's specific focus.

Some common goals include:

- Understand the factors and conditions that forge human behavior and how humans interact within their families, communities and the greater social world.
- Develop a deeper understanding of the impacts of human behavior on the social, natural, family, school, and professional worlds.
- Explore how different societies and cultures interact with their environments throughout history and think what that implies for the present and future.
- Develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be life holistic and sustainable.
- Foster a sense of social responsibility to others and personal self-determination; helps students to become informed and engaged citizens committed to creating a better world for all.

## The History of Human Ecology

The concept of Human Ecology had its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when scientists and social reformers began to explore the relationship between humans and their living environments. The term "human ecology" was coined in the 1920s by American sociologist Robert Park, who used it to describe the study of the interactions between humans and their personal, social, economic, and physical environments.

Over time, Human Ecology has evolved and broadened in scope, and today it encompasses a wide range of topics, including family life and health, child development, environmental sustainability, urbanization, population dynamics, complex social systems, resource use, and social inequality. It is a multidisciplinary field concerned with understanding the complex relationships between humans and their environments beginning with age-related lessons for young children to more complex topics in high schools.

## Recent Evolution of Human Ecology

In the 1960s and 1970s, Human Ecology emphasized ecological issues as concerns about pollution, resource depletion, and environmental degradation grew.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Human Ecology became increasingly multidisciplinary as researchers explored the complex interactions between humans and their living environments. There was new recognition that environmental and social issues, right down to the family level, are interconnected, requiring a multidisciplinary approach.

In the 21st century, Human Ecology has broadened in scope with more focus on meeting personal human needs to reduce social stratification, violence, mental illness, and polarization, along with global environmental and social issues.

Overall, the evolution of Human Ecology as a field of study reflects human society's changing concerns and priorities and also advances in psychology, physical science, health, and technology.

This multi-disciplinary approach to K-14 education must begin during the grade-school years when concepts about the world are forming in young minds and cultural intelligence is set. Without the knowledge and skills from the inclusion of Human Ecology education, children's world-views are limited to their personal living conditions, or they are unable to see the interrelationships of multiple parts of life. Human Ecology educates children to be eagerly proactive, not fearfully reactive. By embracing Human Ecology, students and educators gain a more comprehensive understanding of human-environment interactions and develop more effective solutions to complex personal, environmental and social problems.

### **Human Ecology Education Prepares Students for Adulthood**

Modern societies face significant human life and environmental downsides, including food supply, multiple effects of climate change and resource depletion. All will eventually take their toll on people if populations have not learned to successfully adapt, especially the lower 50% of the country with lower incomes. Every child needs to know how to adapt in their personal lives to potential new realities and should be entitled to the education that makes it possible.

Addressing climate challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves understanding the possible human-based root causes of these problems, and teaching all families how to change behaviors and social systems that are unsustainable. Human Ecology education can change the capitalistic, over-consumption mindset of the modern era.

Here are some ways in which Human Ecology education can make that happen:

1. The lessons explore the personal, social, economic, and cultural factors, locally and at scale, that shape human behavior.
2. It can give students the practical life skills and knowledge they need to address daily quality of life challenges before they become cumulatively damaging. This may involve household management and consumer science, legal rights, educational systems, transportation, and accessing local resources. It creates informed voters who can understand the most important issues for human health and safety and the natural world.

3. Human Ecology education creates new healthy behavior patterns for students that will become innate as they mature and make life decisions. It also gives students the tools and knowledge they need to advocate for policies that promote human resilience.
4. Human Ecology education fosters diversity for mutual benefit and it encourages students to consider how different people and cultures can contribute to understanding and addressing everyone's human needs.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy in Human Ecology Education**

Program planners can integrate Human Ecology concepts into a wide range of subject areas, including:

1. **Consumer Science:** This focus is particularly important for K-14 students as they learn to how to prevent human dysfunction at home and in the world they will soon inherit. Consumer Science addresses personal and household consumption decisions for health, such as foods and nutrition, housing, clothing selection and care, modes of transportation, finance, education, the navigating complex social systems, and life planning. The national impact of this knowledge, for a consumer-based economy, makes this area of instruction important to national economic and democratic health.
2. Other areas of study are introduced during secondary education, grades 9-12. As students prepare for adulthood, they need to understand how all the different environments shape human behavior and how humans affect the natural world with their activities. Psychology, Sociology, Environmental Science, and Economics are all related to human success and become part of the curriculum in high schools. By incorporating these concepts into different subject areas, educators are giving students a better lives and helping them develop a deeper understanding of complex issues, how humans interact, and their own behaviors.

### **Practical Human Ecology Skills Prevent Social Decline.**

Early in life, humans are learning the most, as brains grow and form concepts about the world at home, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. For young people, this learning is experiential, and develops trust or not because they live it, feel it, and form opinions and beliefs based what they experience. Adverse Childhood Experiences, ACEs, can determine life-long negative attitudes that are difficult to counteract later; however, becoming skilled in self-sufficiency, safety and comfort early in life prevents ACEs and develops resiliency and self-determination for life.

Human Ecology education, with its interdisciplinary and practical aspects, is foundational for students to understand themselves and others. As children develop, they learn how to live in a mutually social world, share resources, and how all people are equally affected on the human level by multiple environments, from each person's home to large complex social systems.

### **Human Ecology and Home Economics, are they alike or different?**

Human Ecology and Home Economics are related. Human Ecology is the umbrella field concerned with understanding the complex interactions between humans and all their environments, and finding ways to foster more sustainable and equitable societies. Home

Economics education is the one aspect that focuses on the domestic, personal household and includes topics such as health and nutrition, family finances, raising children, family relations, home management and consumer protection. Since the first eighteen years of a child's life is usually spent living in the home, the level of Home Economics education lays the foundation for personal quality of life and family resilience.

Making individual sustainable and healthy consumption decisions, and gaining the skills to navigate larger complex social systems, supports the entire national population and economy. That sustainability creates a flourishing nation of resilient people.

### **Grade School Human Ecology**

Human Ecology education at the grade school level is more easily understood and experienced through many of the Home Economics household skills because the immediate environment of grade school children is the family household. Educators can incorporate general Human Ecology and household Home Economics into grade school curricula in several ways, depending on the goals and objectives of the program:

- **Health and wellness:** Since the immediate home environment impacts health and wellbeing every day, students learn about food and nutrition, sanitation, physical activity and safety, environmental health, personal habits, clothing care and presentation, and social interaction.
- **Environmental science:** Students learn the limits of the natural environment and the importance of consumer purchasing to conserve resources, including topics such as the water availability, waste disposal, recycling, energy management, climate change, biodiversity.
- **Social studies:** Each culture is unique, sometimes in the same city or rural areas; how they interact and how cultural practices and beliefs shape human and environmental interactions shape students' cultural intelligence. Research says it is set for life by age nine.
- **Art and design:** The built environment and principles of sustainable design affect human behavior and wellbeing through architecture, urban planning, landscape design, transportation, and many other psychological benefits of creating art.

Overall, Human Ecology, incorporating Home Economics, at the grade school level provides students with whole-life personal resilience.

### **High Schools, Transitioning to adulthood**

Through middle school and high school, the Human Ecology curriculum becomes more complex and sophisticated, and applicable to larger communities, as it prepares students to transition into adulthood upon graduation. Here are a few key areas to consider:

- **Health and wellness:** Living independently means consciously making healthy lifestyle choices, purchasing and preparing a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and understanding how to access healthcare services, maintain living spaces, manage time and finances, set goals, meet commitments, and plan for the future.

- Legal responsibilities: Upon age eighteen, all people need understand their legal rights, how to protect them, their responsibilities as a citizen, how the justice system works, and the local laws that affect them, such as housing and taxes.
- Education and career: Higher education and the professional world is competitive and requires knowing personal strengths, aptitudes and interest, what professionalism means, how to present oneself to apply for jobs, and how build a career path.
- Relationships and family: Maintaining relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners in adult life requires understanding how to communicate effectively, set boundaries, employ etiquette, and resolve conflicts.

Overall, transitioning to adulthood is a heavy load without a specific educational program to be successful. It also carries with it the need to learn adapt to changing conditions and opportunities. Successful transition to adulthood means that individuals are self-sufficient and self-determined; they care to be informed, are empowered to effect change when needed, can live in a multi-age family unit, and can meet basic human needs and responsibilities for themselves and others.

### **Teaching strategies for effective Human Ecology education.**

Many different teaching strategies can be used to promote effective Human Ecology education. Here are a few examples:

- Experiential learning: Experiential learning, based in the mind-body connection of all people, means engaging students in hands-on activities to apply their knowledge and skills in a real-world context. Students should learn by doing the skills needed, and not have an instructor simply lecture to them. Experiential learning is especially effective at the lower grade levels for dual purposes, for instance, discovering how science works by frying an egg for a healthy lunch, or how budgeting an allowance teaches finance skills. Hands-on learning includes food, clothing and shelter projects for personal quality of life and social interaction, and also fieldwork, like research projects, internships, and service learning projects.
- Case studies: These experiences involve real-world situations or problems, age-related to grade level, to help students understand underlying causes and potential solutions.
- Problem-based learning: Problem-based learning also involves using real-world problems or challenges as a starting point while working in small groups to brainstorm potential solutions; it helps students to think critically and creatively.
- Role-playing and simulations: Role-playing and simulations involve creating a practice environment where students can explore and practice different roles or scenarios in a family, school, or neighborhood. They encourage thinking about issues from different perspectives.
- Collaborative learning: Collaborative learning involves working in groups to share ideas, knowledge, and skills to solve problems as a team.

By using a variety of teaching strategies and approaches, educators can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that encourages students to think about personal and interpersonal actions in addition to how people can sustain the natural environment.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Human Ecology Education.**

Several barriers can prevent the successful implementation of human ecology education programs:

- **Gender Discrimination:** Human Ecology programs incorporate Home Economics, but the field of Home Economics, even though it is central to wellbeing, and has been in the U.S. since 1862 when the Morrill Act was passed, has suffered from gender discrimination. In its history, only women were required to take the HE courses and since household management is unpaid, and primarily assigned to women in the U.S., male school administrators, board members, and teachers, have not understood its value to family and social health and child development. Today, as a society without this resilience education, every year we are experiencing more social welfare decline and poor mental health in students.
- The emphasis in U.S. education on jobs, jobs, jobs, to the neglect of educating people to meet their needs outside of the job. Therefore, funding and time is limited for human development and the facilities required. The programs need support for experiential learning in labs and lab work or field work can be time-consuming.
- **Limited institutional policy support and faculty expertise:** Human Ecology education programs may not always be supported by institutional policies or priorities and there may be limited faculty expertise in the field. Human Ecology is a multidisciplinary field that requires a diverse range of knowledge.

To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to enlighten leaders, including legislators, also share resources and engage in advocacy and outreach efforts. As local resources diminish and human failure and homelessness becomes increasingly problematic for municipal governance, a failure prevention policy would be for cities to help schools fund Human Ecology education in order to prevent high social costs in the future.

Schools can also seek funding from external sources, collaborate with other institutions, develop partnerships with industry, government, nonprofits, and also provide professional development opportunities for faculty.

### **Conclusion: Future outlook for Human Ecology Education.**

The future outlook for the field of Human Ecology is bright but perhaps for the wrong reasons. Increasing recognition of the importance of it is coming primarily because social decline is accelerating and we see more human suffering and protest in the headlines. For example, lifespans in the U.S. have now declined to the lowest level ever, far below other advanced countries. We also have more obesity, homelessness, poverty, youth violence than other western countries. As the global challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality continue to threaten the health and wellbeing of people and the planet, the demand for Human



Ecology educators who can develop programs to adapt and solve these problems will grow. One can only hope the U.S. will see the need and meet it.

**Call to action for educators and policymakers to prioritize Human Ecology education.**

As the world's challenges become more complex, interconnected, and felt at home, it is increasingly important for educators and policymakers to prioritize Human Ecology education. By providing K-14 students with a deep understanding of the complex interactions between humans and their environments, Human Ecology education can help foster a sense of personal responsibility in private life and environmental awareness and responsibility in larger social arenas. To prioritize Human Ecology education, educators and policymakers must take the following actions:

- Incorporate Human Ecology concepts into all curricula to provide students with a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of human-human and human-environment interactions. Community colleges need to require that every incoming student take a Human Ecology-based Student Success course; and every secondary school should make four years of Human Ecology required to graduate.
- Encourage more experiential learning; This is a powerful real-life tool for engaging students in the learning process and helping them to apply their knowledge and skills in actual situations, both at home and in their communities.
- Support research and make it possible for educational leaders to bring the field to their school districts to develop more sustainable and equitable schools and communities. Human Ecology on the family level makes every next generation more resilient.
- Foster regional partnerships and collaborations with local cities and other local schools, institutions, organizations, and stakeholders to provide valuable resources and expertise to support human ecology education programs.

Human Ecology education instills personal confidence, self-sufficiency and resilience while creating a universally healthy, mature national population. By prioritizing Human Ecology education for every child K-14, educators and policymakers will instill in students the depth of knowledge and personal abilities they need to understand and navigate lifelong challenges.