

Innovation is our ticket to a sustainable future

Five years after the launch of the international education initiative "Forscherwelt," Dr. Simone Bagel-Trah, patron of the initiative and Chairwoman of Henkel's Supervisory Board and Shareholders' Committee, talks about the importance of education in science and explains what makes Henkel's Forscherwelt (Researchers' World) so special.

For many years now, you have emphasized the importance of education within the STEM* subjects and have actively advocated for science education – and not just because you hold a doctorate in Biology. Why is activism in this field so important to you?

Education and research are our most important resources. They are the key to progress and prosperity, and they determine a country's power of innovation. Innovation is our ticket to a sustainable future, and I'm convinced that the natural sciences and technology play a crucial role here. That's why I find it all the more alarming that these subjects – which have given rise to so many inventions and ideas – are not more popular than they currently are. We need to foster children's passion for STEM subjects and turn it into a lasting interest. This can only be accomplished through a joint effort by stakeholders within academia, politics and business.

What contribution can companies make to this?

Companies need highly qualified workers, now and in the future. We take responsibility for this, for example by offering outstanding training. However, pleasure and interest in science take root much earlier in life. That's why we also need to get children excited about the world of science at a younger age. This is the point at which companies can build a bridge between theory and practice through various projects – that's what we do in the Forscherwelt. In this context, I believe that education and pleasure in learning are very closely linked.

How do you get children excited about research?

The Forscherwelt takes exactly this approach: It builds on children's natural inclination to explore and discover the world. As part of the educational initiative, elementary school children get the chance to experiment and learn to "work like a real scientist" in an autonomous fashion.

We opened the first Forscherwelt in Düsseldorf exactly five years ago, offering children an experience space that is tailored to their needs. In addition to the experimentation zone, here are also designated areas for discussion, relaxation and exercise. In addition to Germany, the concept is now present in other countries as well: We have reached about 9,700 children through the initiative worldwide – and hopefully inspired a few future scientists.

What do children learn in the Forscherwelt?

Children are curious, because they want to understand the world around them. By trying things out, asking questions and observing their surroundings, they already apply fundamental research processes in a very intuitive manner. It is precisely this childish curiosity that we want to encourage by providing a space for their creativity. In addition, we want to offer an authentic experience of the world of research and show the children what the job of a researcher really entails. Indeed, children often imagine research scientists as boring, solitary loners. Of course, this couldn't be further from the truth. At Forscherwelt, the children learn that the work of a researcher is actually very diverse and involves some real teamwork: They are asked to work on set tasks autonomously, but within a group, and even receive tips from "real scientists" at Henkel.