

Recycling Activities – Elementary School

SORTING MATERIALS

OBJECTIVE: To learn to distinguish between common recyclable and non-recyclable items.

GRADE LEVELS: K – 2

- Scatter materials on the floor so that all objects are clearly visible. In these materials, include a variety of glass, plastic, metal, paper/cardboard objects. Include in each category both objects that are recyclable and those which are not.
- Place a blue bin and a trash can in the middle of the students.
- Have students come up, one at a time, and select one object.
- Have the students place the object in the container they think it goes in.
- Ask the rest of the class if they agree.
- Discuss the item and whether or not the student was correct.
- For a list of recyclable items, [click here](#).
- Optional: Talk about possible ways to **reuse** each item before recycling or trashing it. (Example: glass jar to catch lightning bugs, Cool Whip container as a water dish for a pet, etc.)

UNDERSTANDING TRASH

OBJECTIVE: To discuss and understand different materials that ends up in a typical trash can, as well as the problems with littering.

GRADE LEVELS: 3 – 6

- Dump a full wastebasket of “clean” trash (for example, clean tissues wadded up to look like trash) on the floor. Ask students what the material is called (garbage, trash). Use a pencil to dig through it.
- Ask students what it would be called if it is dumped outside or on the floor (litter). Help students distinguish between the litter problem and the trash-reduction problem. If everyone in our town stopped littering, would that solve the trash problem? Would we have less trash?

Trash Discussion Topics:

- Currently in the US, each person creates about 1,650 pounds of trash per year. This has increased dramatically in the last 150 years because of an increase in population and an increase in the amount of trash that is generated per person. 120 years ago, people generated 300 pounds of trash a year. Compare that to today.
- Ask students to make a list of the types of trash that were not thrown out 100 years ago, because the item did not exist (plastics, for example), or it was used up or reused (food waste).
- Have students in class attempt to come up with at least five independent reasons why an increasing amount of trash is “bad”. Record all ideas/reasons. Have students try to explain each reason.

Example answers:

- Litter is created when trash is not disposed of correctly.
- Natural resources are wasted when trash is made. (Paper – trees; Plastic – oil)
- Energy is saved when things are made from recycled materials.
- Less pollution is created when recycled material is used in place of raw material (during manufacturing and in obtaining materials for manufacturing). Pollution can affect the ground, water, or air.
- Animal and plant habitats are protected when recycled materials are used since activities such as mining, drilling, and tree-cutting are minimized.

RECYCLING RELAY

OBJECTIVE: To teach students what is recyclable, what is trash, and to show that there are many different uses for items.

GRADE LEVELS: 3 – 6

MATERIALS: 1 container of your choice for “Reuse”; 1 Blue Bin for “Recycling”; and 1 Trash Can for “Trash”; assortment (~20) of materials (some recyclable, some not); 2 sets of small colored stickers for labeling

METHOD:

- Split the class into 2 teams
- Label half of the materials with one color sticker and the other half with the other. They will correspond to each team (ex., yellow team has yellow stickered items)
- Set 3 bins out: “Reuse” closest to the start line, “Recycle” next, and “Trash” farthest away
- Scatter the items in front of the start line
- One at a time, the team must pick up an item that is their team’s color and put it in one of the 3 bins.
- Only give a certain amount of time (this depends on how many materials you have, age group, etc.)
- When time is up, begin to inspect what is in the bins and assign points to each team, based on the colored stickers. If they put an item in the “Reuse” bin, they get 3 points; “Recycle” is 2 points and “Trash” is 1 point. However, if an item is in the wrong bin, they get 0 points.
- A team can only get 3 points for the “Reuse” item if they can come up with a realistic way to reuse it (you may time this as well). If they can’t, it’s 0 points (give the other team a chance and if they think of something, they can “steal” the 3 points)
- The team with the most points wins.

This game teaches students where each item goes, allows them to be creative about reusing the items, and you can help them make the connection that reuse takes less resources (closer bin; more points), recycling is next (next closer bin), and trash is last (farthest away, least points).

HOW MUCH PAPER DO I USE?

OBJECTIVE: For students to get a real view of how much paper they use.

GRADE LEVELS: 4–6

MATERIALS: Bathroom scale

- For one week, have students weigh all the paper in the blue bin and the trash in the trash can at the end of each day.
 - To weigh trash, weigh the empty can at the beginning of the experiment to get a weight. Then, each day weigh the can with trash in it and subtract the difference – that’s how much trash is in the can.
 - If your school only picks up blue bins once a week, weigh it each day and subtract the difference from the previous day. That will tell you how much went into the bin that particular day.
- Track the weights on separate sheets – create graphs
- Also, make note of anything that does not belong in the bin (take them out and weigh with the trash).
- Check the results at the end of the week
 - Have a discussion at the end – Did we recycle more than we threw away? (This can fit into a math lesson – calculate the ratio) What kinds of things were in the blue bin that did not belong? Can we do better about putting things in the correct bin? How?
 - Recycling 1 ton of paper saves 17 trees. How many trees did the class save over one week from the paper they recycled?

Optional:

For fun, have another classroom participate to compare results. Try to keep it fair by prohibiting students from putting things in the bins just to get higher weights.