

# Environmental Education Activity Guides



Use these activity guides to teach a variety of audiences and age groups about many environmental topics, including:

- Air, energy and climate change
- Protecting land and water
- Recycling
- Reducing food waste
- Reducing waste
- Toxicity and hazardous waste

# Introduction



The decisions we make every day can have either a positive or negative impact on the environment, so we all play a role in creating a more sustainable future. These environmental education activity guides can be used to engage audiences of all ages in learning about and taking action to protect the environment.

The activities were developed based on the feedback and experiences of a variety of program managers, and they are designed to be flexible to work with different types of programs and age groups. The activities can be used by both formal and nonformal educators in a variety of settings and working with a range of audiences, including community groups, school classes, youth groups, congregations, early childhood education programs and more.

The activities were developed following best practices for environmental education. The activity guides:

- Feature hands-on, experiential learning.
- Help participants develop knowledge, critical-thinking and decision-making skills, self-confidence, and creativity.
- Allow for participants to help lead the activities and, in many cases, design their own learning.
- Use supplies that you may already have or that are easy to get and are free or low cost.
- Include up-to-date and accurate information on local environmental issues.



## Organization

Activities are included on a variety of environmental topics, including reducing waste, recycling, reducing toxicity and hazardous waste, air, energy conservation and climate change, protecting land and water, and reducing food waste. There are also a few general activities that could be applied to any environmental topic. Each section includes background information to help educators and participants learn about the environmental issue.

Each activity includes:

- Introduction to the activity
- Recommended age group
- Estimated time requirement
- Outcomes for the activity
- Concepts to reinforce
- Supplies
- Preparation steps
- Procedure for carrying out the activity
- Discussion questions
- Additional activity ideas
- Other resources

## Motivating behavior change

Hennepin County's environmental education activity guides were developed based on strategies for motivating people to take action to protect the environment. Motivating behavior change goes beyond sharing information.

For a person to take action they need to:

1. Be aware of a problem.
2. Know specifically what they can do about the problem.
3. Desire to do the action.
4. Believe they are capable of doing it and that it is worthwhile.

The steps to planning a project or activity that engages your audience in taking action includes selecting behaviors that are relatable and actionable for your audience, identifying the perceived benefits of and barriers to those behaviors, then using applicable strategies to encourage action.

It's important to remember that being effective in motivating behavior change often means starting small – focus on engaging your audience in one activity or changing one behavior and build on those successes to create additional change.

## Selecting behaviors

The first step is deciding what behaviors you are encouraging people to change.

Behaviors should be specific. For example, instead of reducing waste, you should select more specific behaviors such as using a reusable bottle, using reusable bags, reducing packaging waste, shopping at reuse stores, etc. If the behaviors you select are too broad or vague, you will struggle to identify the barriers and benefits.



You should also focus on the direct environmental impact of the behaviors you select. For example, it's not about just getting a compost bin, but actually composting, or going beyond purchasing a programmable thermostat to make sure the thermostat is installed and programmed so that it is saving energy.

Finally, think about the impact the behavior will have with your audience. How many of them are already doing the behavior? How likely are they to take this action? If the majority of your audience has already adopted this behavior or if they are unlikely to take this action, you may want to focus on a different behavior.

## Identifying barriers and benefits

The next step is finding out what barriers exist for your audience in taking this action and what they find beneficial about the behavior. This step is critical because it is easy to assume what the barriers and benefits are for a specific action for your audience, but the only way you can really find out is to ask. Gathering this information will help you develop effective strategies to motivate behavior change.

There are many ways to gather this information, including surveying or interviewing your audience,

observing the behavior, looking for applicable case studies and articles, or conducting focus groups. Even a simple interview that asks two questions – what stands in the way of taking this action and why you would take this action – can provide valuable insights.



## Develop strategies

Once you've selected the behaviors you're focusing on and identified the barriers and benefits for your audience, you can develop strategies that will engage your audience in taking action. The research on behavior change tells us to do the following when encouraging people to make changes in long-held beliefs and actions:

- **Use pledges or commitments**

Pledges speak to our internal need to be consistent - if we say we are going to do something, we feel the need to follow through and actually take that action. They also help build self-perception. For example, by committing to recycle or reduce waste, we start to think of ourselves as someone who cares about recycling or reducing waste.

Use commitments when you need to enhance motivation, especially when your audience believes it is important to act but need a nudge to actually take action. You can consider using written, verbal, public or group commitments. For example, invite people to fill out and return a simple pledge form for one or more actions they commit to take, or have people share the actions they are pledging to make on a poster. Following up to see if people have taken action and to offer additional resources or support – either one-on-one or in group discussions – can make commitments an even more effective behavior-change strategy.

- **Create norms**

Norms get at our need to be socially accepted. They send the message that “this is how we do things,” and can be an effective strategy to motivate action on an issue your audience doesn't necessarily care

that much about. Use messaging, announcements, posters, buttons, lawn signs, etc., to let everyone what actions the community is taking.

- **Encourage social diffusion**

We make many decisions – small and large – in our lives based on the recommendations of others. Social diffusion involves engaging leaders and early adopters to encourage others in the community to take action. Using the train-the-trainer model, train leaders on the behavior you are encouraging and ask for their commitment to speak to others. This is an effective strategy to use when your audience lacks the knowledge or skills to take action.

- **Use prompts**

Prompts address the issue that we often operate in auto-pilot, getting stuck in our routines and forgetting to take action. Prompts remind people to engage in a behavior they may otherwise forget to do, such as bringing reusable bags with them to the store. Provide a visual reminder such as a sticker, window cling or flyer that reminds people to take action. Prompts can be a useful way to remind people of actions they have committed to take. If you're asking people to take a pledge, think about how you can have them take home a reminder of the commitment they made.



- **Let people try an activity**

Social anxiety or feeling incompetent can prevent people from taking action. Engage people in hands-on activities that give them the opportunity to learn the specific steps needed to take action in a safe and comfortable space.

- **Offer supplies and resources**

Help people take action by providing the tools they need. Be sure that any giveaways are closely related to the behavior you are encouraging. Relevant giveaways could include reusable shopping bags, recycling bins and labels, bottles of green cleaner or compost bins. Be thoughtful when using incentive items as they can undermine commitment – you want people to be motivated by their desire to take action, not by your prize.



- **Use effective communication and have effective conversations**

Giving people relevant information and helping them plan how they will take action can help motivate behavior change. Make your communications personal, concrete, local, and easy to remember. Integrate specific community goals and impact. Reinforce the message by getting it out through all of your communication channels.

- **Capitalize on trigger and major life events and celebrate successes**

Times when people are already making changes in their lives is a great opportunity to integrate new habits. Trigger and major life events that you may want to focus on include when people move, start a new job, graduate, or become parents. These may also include celebrations such as Earth Day or during the holidays when people are planning celebrations. It's also important to recognize how your community is making progress on your goals or when you reach milestones. Celebrating successes helps create momentum for further change.

## Use strategies that address the barriers you have identified

Barrier	Strategy
Lack of motivation – value action	Commitment
Lack of motivation – don't value	Norms
Forget to act	Prompts
Lack of information	Communication Social diffusion
Lack skills; anxiety	Let people try an activity Social diffusion
External barriers	Make it easy to act: infrastructure, tools, supplies

For more information, see the Environmental Action Project Planning Checklist and Worksheet and in the Appendix.

