

DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO THROW?

Many people think they know everything that can be recycled, but are surprised to learn that some items have been added to recycling programs while other items are a problem in the recycling process. Sorting through recyclable and not recyclable materials is a simple, fun and eye-opening way to engage people in learning more about recycling.

Outcome

Participants will learn what materials can and can't be recycled.

Audience

Youth (ages 5+), parents and children

Time

20 - 30 minutes

Concepts

- Many things can be recycled. Some materials have been added to recycling programs while others are problematic in the recycling process. The basic list of what items are accepted for recycling is consistent throughout Hennepin County and most of the metro area, but some haulers accept more materials for recycling beyond the basic list.
- Some materials cannot be recycled because either there is no good way to recycle them or they cause problems in the recycling process. Try to reduce or avoid these items.
- Recycling conserves energy and natural resources and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Supplies

- Multiple examples of the following items:
 - Recyclables: office paper, newspaper, magazines, phone books, cereal, cracker or pasta boxes, cardboard rolls from toilet paper/paper towels, plastic bottles, plastic cups, plastic containers, metal food cans, pop cans, glass bottles and jars, and cartons.
 - Trash: food/candy wrappers, gift wrap, frozen food boxes, broken toys, Styrofoam™ cups, to-go food boxes, microwave meal trays
 - If your city offers organics recycling collection, consider using examples of items accepted in organics recycling programs. Items include: all food (plastic food toys can be used to represent food), non-recyclable paper like napkins, paper towels and tissues, certified compostable products and other compostable household items such as coffee grounds and filters.
- Containers for sorting recyclables. Boxes, bins, bags or laundry baskets work well.
- Coloring materials (crayons, colored pencils, etc.)
- Handout: Recycling Guide
- Handout: Organics Recycling Guide (*optional*)



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Preparation

- Collect and clean common items that can and cannot be recycled (see a list under supplies, and double-check the details of what is recyclable in your city).
- Put example items from the trash, recycling and organics into a container that can be used as a sorting kit. Make sorting kits of similar difficulty.
- Create as many sorting kits as you need. It's ideal to work in groups of about five. See additional activity ideas for variations for larger groups.
- Make sure that each sorting kit has the same general types of recyclable and non-recyclable items.

Procedure

- Split your audience into groups of about five participants each. Distribute the boxes or bags of items to each group.
- Have the groups work on sorting the materials into trash, recycling and organics items, focusing on what you can recycle at home. You can provide recycling guides or signs to help people determine what goes where. There are many different ways to make this activity engaging for your audience. You can set it up as a game show, timed race, team-building activity or other sort of contest. See additional activity ideas for more details on these additional options.
- As a large group, go through a sorting kit explaining what materials are recyclable or not. Encourage participants to ask questions and discuss options. The Recycling FAQs in the background information section may help you answer some questions. If you're unsure about something, follow up with Hennepin County at environment@hennepin.us to get an answer.
- Some items aren't accepted for recycling because they cause problems at recycling processing facilities, called material recovery facilities or MRFs, which sort recycling after it's picked up at the curb. Show participants how recycling is sorted at a MRF by watching the "How Recycling Works" KARE 11 news story (available at www.hennepin.us/environmentaleducation under videos). Look at the items that cannot be recycled and discuss if there are drop-off recycling options or ways to reduce or eliminate those items.
- Learn how to dispose of specific items with the Green Disposal Guide at www.hennepin.us/greendisposalguide.

Discussion questions

- What did you learn that was new? What items can we recycle that you didn't realize are recyclable?
- Were there any materials that you thought you could recycle but actually aren't accepted for recycling? Do you know of any other options for recycling these materials (there are drop off locations for some materials, such as plastic bags at many grocery stores)?
- Are there any materials you are confused about?
- Why is recycling important?
- Why do you think some people decide not to recycle? What would help them start recycling?
- What did you learn that you want to share with someone else? Who will you share it with?
- How can you incorporate what you learned to set up a recycling system in your home? What would a home recycling system look like?
- What do you want to learn more about?

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Additional activity ideas

Relay race

Teams can use a relay race to fuel friendly competition. Have teams race to see who can sort the items correctly the fastest. Assign a time penalty for each incorrect item.

Circle up

Have participants stand in a circle and give one item to each person. Go around the circle and have each participant say whether they think their item is trash, recycling or organics. Discuss with the group the correct answer and ways to recycle or avoid items not accepted for recycling at home.

Team-building

Have youth work together to create a project from the non-recyclable items. Examples include creating the tallest structure, a model that represents something else or forming a band that plays instruments made from non-recyclable materials.

Recycling chart

Create a recycling chart to help youth remember which items can and can't be recycled. First, make a copy of the *What can my family recycle?* worksheet (see Appendix) for each youth. Cut out photos from magazines or draw pictures of the items that can be recycled and put them in the *What can my family recycle?* worksheet. Encourage youth to post their recycling chart in the kitchen or near the garbage/recycling area at home. Challenge youth and their families to start recycling at least one new item from the recycling chart.

Waste audit

- Examining what materials are being put in the trash or recycling is an eye-opening way to understand your recycling system and identify opportunities to improve.
- Put on protective gear such as rubber gloves and take a look in your trash and recycling bin. Note what kinds of recyclables are in there and calculate the percentage of trash that could be recycled. Use this information to improve recycling within your household or your group's facility. For example, place signs on recycling bins of all the items that can be recycled and place reminders on the trash bin to only throw away things that are truly garbage. If you're doing a waste audit at home, ask participants to take a look at what is going in the trash versus what is getting recycled in different areas of their homes, including the kitchen, office, bathroom and laundry room.
- As a group, discuss what opportunities there are to recycle more. Order labels for participants to put on their trash and recycling bins at home at www.hennepin.us/recycleeverywhere.

Improve your recycling set-up

- Inventory recycling at your home. Where do you have bins at home? We do well at recycling in the kitchen, but can improve recycling in other rooms such as the bathroom, laundry room and home office. Add recycling bins to all areas of your home and make sure to have a recycling bin wherever you have a trash bin. Label the containers so members of your household know what to put in each container. Order labels at www.hennepin.us/recycleeverywhere.

Resources

- **Handout:** Recycling Guide (available in English or bilingual in English and Cambodian Khmer, Hmong, Lao, Spanish, Somali, Thai and Vietnamese)
- Recycling and trash labels for household waste containers (order at www.hennepin.us/recycleeverywhere)