

KEEP OKLAHOMA BEAUTIFUL

Environmental Education Program

Litter & Recycling



Elementary: K-2nd Grade (Ages 5-8)

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VOCABULARY WORDS

Habitat – the place where an animal lives and finds everything it needs like food, water, and shelter

Litter – trash that is left on the ground or thrown outside instead of put in a trash can or recycling bin where it belongs

Nature – the outdoors world of plants, animals, water, and soil that we share with all living things

Pollution – anything that makes our air, water, or land dirty and unsafe for people and animals

Recycling – turning old materials like paper, plastic, and cans into something new instead of throwing them away

The 3 R's – three things we can all do to help the Earth:

- **Reduce** — use less stuff
- **Reuse** — use things again instead of throwing them away
- **Recycle** — turn old things into new things

Trash – things we throw away that we no longer need; trash belongs in a trash can, never on the ground

Wildlife – the birds, bugs, and animals that live outside in *nature*



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What Is *Litter* and Why Does It Matter?

Litter is any trash that is left on the ground, thrown from a car window, or dumped outside instead of placed in a proper trash can or recycling bin. For young children, *litter* is a perfect entry point to environmental education because it is one of the most visible and tangible environmental problems they can observe and act on in their daily lives.

Litter harms the environment in ways that are easy for young children to grasp. It makes outdoor spaces ugly and unwelcoming. It can be dangerous for animals who mistake it for food or become tangled in it. It washes into streams and rivers when it rains, *polluting* the water that animals and people depend on.

The 3 R's: A Framework for Young Learners

The 3 R's — Reduce, Reuse, Recycle — give young children a simple and memorable framework for thinking about waste. At the K-2 level the most important concept is that trash doesn't just disappear when we throw it away. It goes somewhere like a landfill, a waterway, or the ground, and it stays there for a very long time. Understanding this helps children develop the habit of thinking before they throw something away.

- **Reduce** means using less in the first place like choosing a reusable water bottle instead of a disposable one and avoiding unnecessary packaging.
- **Reuse** means finding a second life for something instead of throwing it away like using both sides of a piece of paper, bringing bags to the store, or turning an old container into a pencil holder.
- **Recycle** means putting materials like paper, plastic, glass, and aluminum into recycling bins so they can be made into something new instead of taking up space in a landfill.



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Tips for Teaching Litter & Recycling for ages under 8

1. Keep it concrete and visual – show real examples of litter, recycling bins, and reusable items
2. Connect to emotions – how does it feel to see a beautiful park full of litter? How does it feel after you pick it up?
3. Celebrate action – even picking up one piece of litter is worth celebrating!
4. Connect to your school or group – does your school or organization recycle? Where are the recycling bins? What goes in them?
5. Craft with recyclables – show that “trash” can be turned into artwork or something useful

Discussion Prompts

Before Learning – Getting Curious

1. Have you ever seen litter outside? Where? How did it make you feel?
2. What do you think happens to trash after someone throws it on the ground?
3. What do you do with trash at your house? Does your family recycle?
4. If you could make one rule to help keep Oklahoma clean what would it be?

After Learning – Going Deeper

1. Why is it important to put trash in a trash can instead of dropping it on the ground?
2. What is one way you can Reduce, Reuse, or Recycle at school or at home?
3. How does litter hurt animals?
4. What would our school/building look like if everyone picked up one piece of litter every day?
5. What is one thing you want to teach your family about litter?



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A Discussion and Activity Guide for K-2 Educators

This guide gives you everything you need to lead a fun, age-appropriate conversation about litter with your K-2 students. **No prep required** beyond reading through it yourself first!

INTRODUCING SCISSORTAIL (5 minutes)

1. Show students a picture of a scissortail flycatcher, OK's state bird, and ask:
 - a. Has anyone seen this bird before? Where?
 - b. What do you notice about it? (Long tail, pretty colors)
2. Tell students: "This is Scissortail and he needs our help! Scissortail lives outside in nature. He needs clean air, clean water, and a clean home to be healthy. But sometimes people drop litter outside and it can hurt him and his animal friends. Today we're going to learn how to be Earth heroes and help Scissortail! We're going to go outside and pick up as much trash as we can in 5 minutes, then we'll come back and talk about what we found and how we helped Scissortail and his animal friends!"

WHAT IS LITTER? (10 minutes)

1. Ask students: "What is litter? Where have you seen it?"
2. After discussion explain: "Litter is trash that someone dropped on the ground instead of putting it in a trash can. It doesn't belong there — and it can hurt animals, make our community dirty, and even get into our water."
3. Show or draw examples of common litter items and ask:
 - a. Where should this go instead?
 - b. What might happen if an animal tried to eat this?
 - c. What might happen if it rained and this was on the ground?



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THE 3 R'S SONG (5 minutes)

Teach students this simple chant to the tune of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star to help them remember the 3 R's:

Reduce, reuse, recycle too,
These are things that we can do!
Use less stuff and you will see,
Less trash means a happy tree.
Reduce, reuse, recycle too,
Earth says thank you — me and you!

LITTER OR TRASH CAN? (10 minutes)

Play a quick sorting game. Call out items one at a time and have students point to a trash can or the floor to show where each item ends up when someone litters vs. does the right thing:

- An empty juice box (trash can)
- A candy wrapper dropped on the playground (floor = litter!)
- A plastic bag left on the sidewalk (floor = litter!)
- A banana peel put in the compost bin (trash can)

Discuss: How does it feel when someone litters? How does it feel when you do the right thing?

EARTH HERO PLEDGE (2 minutes)

Have students stand and repeat after you:

"I am an Earth hero. I will put my trash where it belongs. I will pick up litter when I see it. I will help keep Oklahoma beautiful. For Scissortail and all his friends!"

