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Textile Recycling Fact Sheet

You and your students are probably used to recycling aluminum, paper, glass, and other items. But did you know that clothing and other textiles can be recycled too? Here are some textile recycling facts to share with your class:

The basics

- The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the average person throws away **70 pounds** of clothing per year. That adds up to **3.8 billion pounds of unnecessary waste added to our landfills**.
- Clothing and household textiles currently make up **5.2% of the waste in landfills**.
- A textile is any item made from cloth or an artificial fabric like vinyl. Textiles are used for clothing, linens, bedding, upholstery, curtains, carpets, and other items. **Any textile item, even if it's worn, torn, or stained, can be recycled.** You can even recycle a single shoe! Items simply need to be clean and dry.
- Recycling clothing and textiles **decreases the use of natural resources**, such as water used in growing crops and petroleum used in creating new clothing and textiles. It also decreases the need for chemicals used in manufacturing new textiles and the pollution caused by the manufacturing process.

How are recycled textiles used?

- Resold at charities' secondhand clothing stores
- Sent to developing countries
- Turned into wiping cloths, which are used in a variety of industries and businesses (everything from manufacturers to repair shops, construction industries, stores, and maintenance and custodial departments)
- Processed back into fibers and turned into paper, yarn, insulation, carpet padding, and other items

Where can clothing and textiles be recycled?

If your town doesn't accept textiles with other recyclables, donate your items to a local recycling center or charity. **Nearly 100% of donated items are recycled.** The recycling center or charity will determine which items are usable as clothing, which can be sold and turned into wiping rags, and which can be sold and processed back into fibers to make new products. Charities and recyclers generate revenue for their programs, and textiles get a second (or third or fourth) life. To locate a donation center near you, visit www.smartasn.org.

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More Textile Recycling Facts

What are specific textiles recycled into?

Here are a few examples:

- Stuffed toys and pillows become car seat stuffing and automobile insulation.
- T-shirts, sheets, towels, and clothing become wiping cloths.
- Denim becomes home insulation.
- Shoe soles become paving material.
- Sweaters and coats become carpet padding.
- Curtains and drapes become stuffing for pillows, sleeping bags, and animal beds.
- Wool sweaters and materials become baseball and softball filling.
- Velvet materials become jewelry box lining.
- Leftover fabric scraps become paper money.

Additional resources

- *Something From Nothing* by Phoebe Gilman (Scholastic, 1992); geared for students from preschool to grade 3, this adaptation of a Yiddish folktale follows a piece of fabric as it goes from a baby blanket to a jacket to a vest to a tie, and so on.
- *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy* by Pietra Rivoli (John Wiley, 2005); good source of background information about what happens to used clothing.
- *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* by Karen Tranberg Hansen (University of Chicago Press, 2000); good source of information about the used clothing industry in Africa.