

# 1. Connecting with Our Actions: A Million Year Picnic

Source: Adapted from “A Million Year Picnic” by Jim Petrie from *Green Teacher*, Issue #46

## Description

Chris Van Allsburg’s book *Just a Dream* is a wonderful vehicle to introduce young children to the concept of waste minimization. The central character is Walter and the story focuses on Walter’s dream of the future. In this activity, children examine how long it takes certain items to decompose and, based on that information, they have an opportunity to make their own choices about what is best to take on a picnic.

## Background Information

There is no place on Earth called “away.” All the items we throw away must go somewhere, and usually end up in the soil, air, streams and oceans. By changing our habits, reducing our waste and reusing whenever possible, we can minimize the amount of garbage going into landfill.

**Note:** *Just a Dream* can be hard to find. It is a very special book and well worth the effort to track it down. If you cannot reserve a copy through the school/public library system, order through your school librarian or a bookstore (delivery takes up to 4 weeks).

## Materials

- ▶ one copy of *Just a Dream* by Chris Van Allsburg (ISBN: 0-395-53308-2)
- ▶ 4 “picnic blankets”
- ▶ 4 picnic baskets (small cardboard boxes work well)
- ▶ collection of disposable items: wax paper, store-bought lunch packaging, tin foil containers, juice boxes, tin foil, pop cans, paper, glass, etc.
- ▶ collection of reusable alternatives items: thermos, reusable sandwich and juice containers, etc. and unpackaged items such as fruit

## Time Allotment

Story and Introduction: 15 minutes

Timeline and Discussion: 5 minutes

Picnic: 10 minutes

Student Presentations: 10 minutes (optional)

Discussion: 5 minutes

## Teaching/Learning Strategies

1. Survey the class about their dreams. Ask students if they dream, what they dream about, how real their dreams are, and if their dreams have ever come true.
2. Explain that in the book *Just a Dream* Walter is a character who dreams a lot too! He dreams of the future of the Earth.
3. Read to discover Walter's dream. Was this a happy dream or a sad dream? Could this dream come true? How did Walter change his dream?
4. After reading the book, create a timeline of events in the story. What was the major change that Walter made to alter these events?
5. Discuss the importance of recycling and introduce the first two "Rs" - reducing and reusing.
6. Break the class up into 4 groups. Each group should sit at a picnic blanket.
7. Distribute materials to each group - items that are highly packaged and disposable as well as environmentally-friendly alternatives.
8. Each group must choose what it will take on the picnic, keeping in mind Walter's dream of the future.
9. Groups can present their picnic baskets to each other, explaining why they made the choice of certain items.

## Follow-up Discussion Questions

- ▶ From what we have learned, are there ways that we can affect the landfills of the future? How?
- ▶ Can one person make a difference?
- ▶ Can one person do it all alone?

## Extensions for additional classroom projects/activities

- ▶ Engage the students in a waste-free lunch campaign for a week; challenge them not to send anything to the landfill from their lunches.
- ▶ Create posters for the lunchroom to help other students learn about living "more lightly" on the Earth. See the Ontario EcoSchools *Waste Minimization Guide* for additional information about waste-free lunch campaigns.
- ▶ Set up a Waste Relay Race: collect items, or pictures of items, that are reusable, recyclable, compostable and garbage. Set up recycling bins, a reuse box, garbage container and a composter. Using the format of a relay race, test your students' ability to decide what goes where.
- ▶ If your school has a composter, or any of your students have composters at home, consider adding composting to this lesson as yet another way to divert garbage from landfills.