

I have heard it said that you have to repeat an action daily for as much as 21 days straight in order for it to become a habit. I wonder how long it takes before it becomes a "ritual"? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a habit is "*a usual way of behaving: something that a person does often in a regular and repeated way.*" Based on that definition, a habit is something personal based on an individual's action. A ritual, on the other hand, is something "done in accordance with social custom or normal protocol." This explanation implies that rituals are widely accepted and expected in a social environment. A ritual is a fairly "universal" action accepted with the culture of the country or people. In order for an action to become a ritual, children have to see it modeled and reinforced from the time of birth, so that they know it is part of culture in which they live. This means adults have to "buy in" to it as well.

In order for the task of recycling to become a ritual, it needs to start in the home. It needs to become a family ritual. Why recycle? Here are a few statistics from the Keep America Beautiful website (http://www.kab.org/Recycling_Facts_and_Stats) to help us understand the value of recycling:

- Overall, Americans recovered 34% of waste generated in 2009. That means we threw away 161 million tons of material, which amounts to about three pounds of garbage per person per day. (The website also reports that the average American generates 4.4 pounds of waste **per day**.)
- Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run your television for three hours.
- Recycling one glass bottle saves enough energy to light a 100-watt light bulb for four hours, power a computer for 30 minutes, or a television for 20 minutes.
- Producing recycled paper takes 40% less energy than producing paper from virgin wood pulp.

These statistics barely scratch the surface of the solid waste data that supports the need for making recycling a ritual in our homes by adults and children, alike. Working together is a great way to show the importance of recycling to children and establish the mindset needed to have a successful home recycling system.

Often times, to get ideas to stick in the minds of children, parents and educators find catchy phrases to help them remember the information. For instance, we have all heard the phrase "Stop, Drop, and Roll" as a means for remembering fire safety steps. In my research on recycling, I discovered a phrase to help children and adults alike remember the steps we should take as part of our recycling rituals. The phrase is "Wash, Squash, and Pop."^{**}

WASH: Washing away residual liquid or food from packaging reduces the growth of mold and bacteria and keeps your house smelling fresh and clean in between recycling drop-off times. Children can have this assigned as part of their daily chores – rinsing out milk jugs or juice bottles. Of course, be careful with aluminum cans and other items that have sharp edges – those are best reserved for older children and adults to clean.

SQUASH: If the recyclable can be squashed, do it! This reduces the amount of space the item takes up in your recycle receptacle and helps reduce the space it takes at the recycle station you take it to. Kids enjoy stomping on aluminum cans (shoes required!) or smashing down plastic milk bottles or shampoo bottles.

POP: Once you have ensured the recyclable is clean and squashed; it's time to "Pop!" it into the recycle bin to take to the recycle center at a later time. For some homes, especially those with no children and few residents, this may be only a monthly trip. In my home, with 3 kids and a farm, we need to go much more often than that!

What should be recycled? Cardboard and paper, food cans, aluminum beverage cans and other aluminum such as clean aluminum foil and take-out containers, plastic bottles and plastic, in general. Although there are many other items that can (and should) be recycled, starting with this list will get your family off on the right foot.

Cardboard recycling begins by breaking the boxes down into flat pieces. You often see this done in grocery and discount stores as they restock shelves. Paper, greeting cards, and paper wrapping should lay flat. Food cans should be washed and the lids placed inside the washed can. If possible, squash the can to save space. Aluminum cans should also be rinsed out and squashed, along with aluminum trays and take-out food containers.

Plastic containers should not be limited to soda pop beverage bottles. Shampoo and shower gel bottles, along with window cleaner bottles, detergent bottles, yogurt containers, plastic bags, plastic food containers, clear plastic wrap, and milk jugs are all made from plastic that can be recycled.

**"The Wash, Squash, and Pop!" phrase was coined by a nonprofit organization called Repak. This member owned organization is licensed by the Irish government to ensure that businesses comply with packaging regulations in that country. Our friends across the pond have made recycling a natural and expected way of living in European countries and we can learn much from their approach to recycling practices. Their approach to recycling has long ago become a ritual rather than a choice that some have made into a habit like we here in America.

Look at how you can make recycling a ritual in your home and get started. For more information about recycling, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!