What Is the Water Cycle?

from The Science of Water Teacher’s Guide and for Mystery of the Muddled Marsh

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BioEdSM
Teacher Resources from the Center for Educational Outreach at Baylor College of Medicine

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Acknowledgments
The Science of Water educational materials, first developed as part of the My Health My World® project at Baylor College of Medicine, have benefited from the vision and expertise of scientists and educators representing a wide range of specialties. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to Michael Lieberman, M.D., Ph.D., William A. Thomson, Ph.D., and Carlos Vallbona, M.D., who have lent their support and expertise to the project.

Special acknowledgment is due to our original partners in this project, the Texas Medical Association and the American Physiological Society (APS). We especially thank Marsha Lakes Matyas, Ph.D., of APS, for her direction of field test activities and ongoing collaboration.

Several colleagues provided valuable assistance during the development of this guide. In particular, we would like to thank Cassius Bordelon, Ph.D.; Zenaido Camacho, Ph.D.; Ronald Sass, Ph.D.; Saundra Saunders, M.A.; Linda Thomson, M.A.; Cathey Whitener, M.S.; Ellison Wittels, M.D.; and Rosa Maria Ynfante, B.S.

Special thanks go to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Allen Darry, Ph.D., Frederick Tyson, Ph.D., and Liam O’Fallon for their support of the My Health My World project and the related Environment as a Context for Opportunities in Schools (ECOS) project.

We are especially grateful to the many classroom teachers in Washington, D.C., and Houston and Austin, Texas, who participated in the field tests of these materials and provided invaluable feedback.
Properties of Water

Physical Science Basics

More than 70% of Earth’s surface is covered by water, with about 96.5% of it in the global oceans. This amazing substance is essential for all life on our planet and helps maintain Earth’s climate. Water has several unique properties that distinguish it from most other substances.

- **Water has both a high boiling point (100°C; 212°F) and a low freezing point (0°C; 32°F).** Consequently, it can be found naturally as a solid (ice or snow), a liquid (liquid water) and a gas (steam or water vapor), at any given time on our planet.

- **Liquid water changes temperature very slowly.** This characteristic helps animals to maintain their body temperatures. It also keeps large areas of water from warming or cooling rapidly, thereby helping to regulate Earth’s climate.

- **Liquid water is an excellent solvent.** This property makes water valuable to living organisms. All of the thousands of chemical processes inside cells take place in water. Water also carries dissolved nutrients throughout the bodies of living organisms and transports wastes. Unfortunately, the same characteristics make liquid water easy to pollute, because so many different chemicals can be dissolved in it.

- **Molecules in liquid water are attracted to one another and, as a result, “stick” very closely together.** This properly explains water’s ability to form rounded droplets and to rise within a thin, hollow tube. This characteristic is important for plants, which conduct water and nutrients through very narrow tubes extending from the roots to the branches and leaves.

In the water (hydrologic) cycle, individual water molecules travel as liquid water in the oceans, water vapor in the atmosphere, water and ice on the land, and underground water.

Source: NASA Earth Observatory.

Water droplets on *Taraxacum officinale*, the common dandelion.
Liquid water expands when it becomes a solid (ice). Most substances take up less space when they are transformed from a liquid to a solid. Water, on the other hand, actually takes up more space as a solid because the molecules in ice crystals are farther apart than those in liquid water. Since it is less dense, ice floats on top of liquid water.

Water is colorless and allows light to shine through it. Plants can grow underwater because water is transparent to the wavelengths of light needed for photosynthesis. Most of these properties are related to the structure of the water molecule, which consists of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. The oxygen atom and the hydrogen atoms share electrons, but the electrons are not shared equally. The electrons are pulled toward the oxygen side of the molecule, which ends up with a slight negative charge. Correspondingly, the hydrogen side of the molecule ends up with a slight positive charge. This separation of positive and negative charges (polarity) causes each water molecule to act like a tiny magnet, capable of clinging to other water molecules and to any other electrically charged particle or surface.
What Is the Water Cycle?

Physical Science

CONCEPTS
- Water can be found naturally as a solid, a liquid and a gas on Earth.
- Water circulates among these three states in the water cycle.

OVERVIEW
Students create a simple model of the water cycle.

SCIENCE, HEALTH & MATH SKILLS
- Predicting
- Making and recording observations
- Measuring
- Drawing conclusions

TIME
Preparation: 10 minutes
Class: 30 minutes to set up; 30 minutes to observe and draw conclusions

MATERIALS
Each group will need:
- 20 ice cubes
- 2 cups of sand
- Shoebox (see SETUP for alternative)
- Aluminum foil (to line the bottom and sides of the shoebox)
- Plastic wrap (to cover the top of the shoebox)
- Large rubber band, about 7 in. x 1/8 in. (to secure the plastic wrap)
- Measuring cup, 8 oz
- Lamp with incandescent bulb if sunny window is not available
- Copy of “The Water Cycle” page

Each student will need:
- Sheet of drawing paper

Setup
Place a container of sand in a central area, so that groups may measure out the quantities they need. As an alternative to shoeboxes, aluminum foil and plastic wrap, students may use plastic boxes with clear covers.

PROCEDURE
Session 1: Making the model
1. Have each group line the inside of its box by pressing a single sheet of aluminum foil along the bottom and up the sides of the box.
2. Direct groups to take turns measuring out two cups of sand and placing it in a pile at one end of their boxes.
3. Have each group smooth the sand to create a hill at one end of
Students create a model of the water cycle by placing ice cubes over a mound of sand within a closed container.

4. Have each group place 20 ice cubes on top of the “land” in the box. The ice cubes will represent “snow” and “ice” in the model.

5. Help the groups cover each box with a sheet of clear plastic wrap and secure it with a large rubber band. (If using plastic storage boxes, cover them securely.)

6. Discuss the models with the class. Ask, Which part of the box and its contents could represent land? Which part could represent snow on the tops of mountains or ice in the winter? Do you think a lake could form? If so, where would it be?

7. Ask students, What do you think will happen if we put the boxes in the sun? Have each student fold a sheet of drawing paper in half. Then direct students to use one-half of the sheet to draw a “side view” of what they think the box will look like at the end of the day.

8. Place the boxes in a sunny window or a under a lamp with an incandescent (not fluorescent) light bulb. If possible, have the students observe their boxes at intervals throughout the day. Otherwise, have them observe the boxes within the next day or so.

Session 2: Looking at results
1. Have the students observe their boxes without removing the covers. Ask them to note the changes that have occurred inside the boxes. What happened to the ice cubes? What else is

Continued
different about the inside of the box? In most cases, at least a few drops of water will have condensed on the inside of the covering. Ask, Where did the drops of water come from?

2. Help students understand that all three states of water have been present in their shoeboxes. Review the different states in which water can be found—ice or snow (solid), liquid water and water vapor. Breathe on a mirror or piece of glass to show students how water vapor condenses on a surface, OR boil a small container of water, so that students may observe the cloud of steam. Hold a glass or mirror above the steam.

3. Let the students remove the covers from their boxes. Ask them to observe the surface of the sand. Ask, Has the surface of the sand changed? In what ways?

4. Talk about where the water in the box has gone. Where was all of the water in the box when we started? Where is the water now? If students have not noticed that the surface of the sand is wet, point out that some of the water has run into the bottom of the box to make a “lake,” and some has soaked into the sand. Help students understand that the same processes take place outside when it rains and snows.

5. Have students draw a side view of the box on the remaining half of their folded sheet of drawing paper. Discuss the outcomes they observed and compare their findings with their predictions.

6. Challenge students to think about what would happen if other substances (for example, chemicals, oils, etc.) also were present on or in the sand.

7. Give each student a copy of “The Water Cycle” page, or project an overhead transparency of the page. Have students identify the forms in which water is present in the diagram (for example, snow on mountaintops is a solid form of water, and water evaporating from the ocean represents water in a gas phase). Direct very young students to place a sticker everywhere on the page where they can find some form of water.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS TO THINK ABOUT
• What would happen to the water on our planet if the recycling of water through the atmosphere suddenly stopped? What does this teach us about using water wisely?
• When water evaporates, any substances that had been dissolved in the water are left behind. What eventually happens to manufactured chemicals that have been mixed into water? How could this be avoided?

Most snowflakes are hexagon-shaped. This six-sided arrangement actually reflects the arrangement of water molecules inside the crystals of snow. Each snowflake contains approximately $10^{16}$, or 10,000,000,000,000,000 water molecules!
The Water Cycle

WHAT IS THE WATER CYCLE?

Physical Science
El ciclo del agua

WHAT IS THE WATER CYCLE?
Physical Science