Bouncing Balls in Bubble Packs

Goal: To encourage the student to explore recent history by interviewing members of two or more generation groups about changes in product packaging.

Subject: Language Arts, Social Studies

Background:

If possible, bring an inexpensive toy in a bubble pack to class and open it as you present the following background material.

What’s the first thing you do when you get a new toy? You want to try it out—like right now. But first you have to get it out of the package.

Most of the toys you buy come in a plastic and cardboard bubble pack. It’s hard to open. And once you do get your toy out, the only thing you can do with the package is throw it in the trash. Since the plastic and cardboard are stuck together, you can’t even take it to the recycling center.

How do you think toys were packaged before someone had the bright idea of locking them up in bubble packs? How many bubble packs do you throw away every year? And what is the reason for those bubble packs anyway?

You can bet your great grandfather didn’t have to fight his new toys out of bubble packs. He bought his rubber ball from a large bin at the store and probably bounced it home with no wrapping at all.

The toothpaste you squeezed onto your toothbrush this morning came in a tube which came in a cardboard box. Your great grandmother probably brushed her teeth with baking soda that her mother bought in large boxes to use for baking, cleaning, brushing teeth, and settling upset stomachs.

Your breakfast waffles some sealed in a plastic bag inside a cardboard box covered with cellophane. Your great grandfather ate pancakes made from flour which his mother bought in a 50-pound cloth bags. After the bag was empty, she used it to sew curtains or clothes for her children.

The compact disk you bought last week came encased in a protective plastic box inside a cardboard box covered with cellophane. Your great grandmother had the luxury of buying phonographic records, they were probably wrapped in nothing more than a paper sleeve.

Some of the packaging that products have picked up over the years is necessary, of course. Packaging around food protects us from contamination and keeps out would-be tamperers. Since we have less time for cooking than our great grandmothers did, many modern foods are packaged so they are quick and easy to prepare. Products that are packaged in boxes all the same size are easier to store and can be moved around by machines. They are also easier to move across the country and around the world.

But many products are packaged for nothing more than eye appeal. The larger the package, the more space it takes on the shelf, leaving less room for the competition. It’s also the first package you see.

Where does all the packaging go after you throw it in the trash? How much energy and valuable resources are used up just to make packages that we throw away?
Maybe we can learn something from our grandparents and great-grandparents about putting some of that energy and those resources to better use.

Activity:
1. Set up a panel discussion about changes in packaging and trash disposal over the past 50 years. Invite parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of students to participate, but try to get a cross section of age groups (one person between the age of 30 and 40, one between 40 and 50, and one person over 60—75, if possible.
2. Have students brainstorm questions to ask the panel ahead of time. Some possible questions might be Are we more wasteful today? In what ways? What kinds of things did you throw in the trash? What did you do with trash? How often did you buy new clothes? How often did you get new toys? What kinds of packages did the toys come in? How often did you go to the store? What were stores like? Did you ever drink pop? How was it sold? How often did you get candy? How was it sold? What about fruits and vegetables and other things you ate?
3. Have students take turns asking questions during the panel discussion. Instruct them to take notes during the discussion of things they find most interesting. Then assign a report on the discussion.

Related Activities:
1. Have students keep a journal for a week of all the products they use. Have them keep a list of all the packaging they throw away and what the packaging is made of. If the packaging is made from plastic, what kind of plastic (see plastic recycling symbols in “Don’t waste energy”)?
2. Have students research the changes in packaging over the past 100 years by going to the library and looking at old magazines.
3. Have students break up into groups and discuss reasons for packaging on products. For instance, the packaging on toys probably is to help prevent shoplifting as well as to catch the eye of the young shopper. Have students write letters to manufacturers expressing their opinions about excessive packaging.