9

Which holds the most?

Materials

- A variety of plastic containers and bottles (see "Before you begin")
- Large waterproof container or mat for catching any spills when you pour water (optional)
- Funnel or pitcher for pouring (optional)

"I thought this tall container would hold everything, but it doesn't! I'll try this other one—it's shorter, but much wider."

Estimating how much can fit in a container, box, or suitcase is a practical skill that involves the math of geometry and measurement. In this activity, children work on this important math as they look for the container that holds the most water. They learn about length, width, and height—the three "dimensions" of three-dimensional shapes. They also learn that it's important to consider all three dimensions when you're trying to figure out what's the biggest.

Try this activity when you have a few extra minutes and are near a water source (the kitchen tap, the bathtub, an outdoor hose, or the beach).

Before you begin

Gather a few empty plastic containers in different sizes and shapes. You can use storage containers, toy bottles or pails, or containers that once held safe household products such as dish soap, syrup, or juice. (Clean them, and if possible, take the labels off.) Try to include some containers that hold about the same amount but look very different.

1. Predict which can hold the most

Ask your children to predict which container would hold the most if all the containers were full.

"What if we filled these empty containers all the way up with water—which one do you think would hold the most water?"

Some children may look at measures on container labels (such as "16 fl. oz." or "295 ml") to find which container holds the most. If this happens, suggest that just for fun, everyone should try predicting without looking at the labels.

2. Explain the predictions

Ask your children to give reasons for their predictions.

"Why do you think this one will hold the most?"

If they say, "It just looks bigger," encourage them to think about size and shape.

"Is the one you think will hold the most the tallest? Widest? Roundest?"

3. Test the predictions

Start with a container that someone thinks will hold the most. Fill it with water. If it's really the largest, there should be some extra when you pour the water into any of the other containers.

Choose another container and pour the water into it. (A funnel or pitcher can make the pouring easier.) Is there any water left over?

Keep trying this with different containers until you're sure which one holds the most.

4. Discuss whether the predictions matched the results

If your children were surprised about which held the most, encourage them to consider size and shape:

"We both predicted that this tall, thin shaving lotion bottle would hold the most, but this round shampoo bottle held the most. I wonder why. Do you think it's something about how wide it is?"

When you repeat this activity

Try some different containers—larger or smaller ones, a variety of sizes and shapes. Encourage younger children to use more "size and shape" words (such as wide, long, tall) as they talk about the containers. Challenge older children to find containers in the house that hold about the same amount but are shaped very differently.

Variations

How many times larger? (ages 7–11)

Gather a variety of empty containers. Include a small one (such as a spice jar) to "measure" the others with. Then, make some predictions:

"Let's say we want to fill up this big syrup bottle with water. We're going to do it by filling this little jar with water. Then, we'll pour the water from the little jar into the syrup bottle. How many times do you think we'd need to do that in order to fill the syrup bottle all the way up?"

Check predictions by filling the containers with the small one you are using to measure with. Keep track of how many times you pour. If the containers are marked with how much they hold, challenge older children to verify their predictions with calculations based on these capacity measurements, too.

Check with measurements (ages 7–11)

Try this when you're unpacking groceries, organizing shelves, cleaning out the refrigerator, or searching for a container to store leftovers. The containers you use can be empty, full, or partly full.

Choose containers that are marked with how much they hold. Look for this measure on the labels of liquid products (such as honey, liquid detergents, and juice). Some plastic storage containers have this measure on the bottom. This measure is often given in both fluid ounces (fl. oz.) and milliliters (ml). You may also see liters (L), cups (c.), pints (pt.), quarts (qt.), or gallons (gal.). For this activity, use containers marked with the same units.

Ask your children to predict which would hold the most if they were all full. After children make their predictions, show them where one container is marked with how much it holds. Help them find a similar marking on each container, and then ask which number is largest.