

Math Sense: Learning about Coins



Most preschoolers do not yet understand the values and uses of money. To help 3- and 4-year-olds become more familiar with money, teachers and caregivers can first engage them in investigations of coins. Keep in mind that coins can be a choking hazard so coin activities must be adult supervised.

Have a coin wash.

- Invite small groups of children to wash and rinse 20-30 pennies in tubs of mild detergent and lukewarm water. As they handle and converse about the coins, you can gain a sense of what they understand and misunderstand about money.
- Invite children to describe the pennies they are cleaning. Help them keep track of their thoughts and observations. Next time, tell the children you are adding coins called nickels to the coin wash. Invite them to compare nickels and pennies (colors, sizes, designs). Over time, add other coins to the coin wash.
- You might explain that a nickel can buy the same amount as 5 pennies, and so on. But do not be surprised if the children don't fully understand this idea!

Sort and compare coins.

- Make mixed sets of 10-20 cleaned coins for sorting. Ask the children questions about their collections: "How could you tell if you have more pennies or more nickels?" Let them make patterns using their coins.
- Invite children to make stacks of 10 coins. Which is taller—a stack of 10 nickels or 10 pennies? Let them find out how many pennies fit in a row on a 12-inch ruler. Some children need help counting. Help them record their findings.

Play with money.

- Teach children a coin-stacking game using 6-sided dice and bowls of a single kind of coin. In pairs or small groups, they can take turns adding to their stacks according to rolls of the dice. Help them keep track of how many coins are in each growing stack. Play this game on the floor so the coins do not have far to fall.
- Give a small bowl of pennies and a spoon to a pair of children. Invite them to take turns scooping coins with the spoon. Help them record how many pennies are in each scoop. What was the largest amount they scooped? The smallest?
- Play a matching game. Draw circles on a paper with the numbers 1, 5, 10, and 25 inside them. See if children can match the coin to its corresponding value.

Investigate coins as objects.

- Invite children to try flipping a coin, making it spin, or standing it on edge.
- Place a piece of paper over some coins and use the side of a crayon to do a rubbing over the top. Help the children notice the texture and details that come through on the rubbing.
- Provide magnifiers for looking at coins. Invite children to sketch some coins. A sketch can become the basis for a model made from modeling clay or other materials.
- Help children find information such as what coins are made of, how they are made, and what is depicted on the front and back of each type of coin.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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