



Climate Conversations: Connecting with Young People

“In the face of climate change, hope only comes in the form of action.”
~ [Jamie Margolin](#), 17, Zero Hour Co-Founder

[Climate anxiety](#) in children and young people is on the rise globally, as we witness immoral government inaction to climate breakdown. Young people [feel betrayed](#), ignored and abandoned by leaders who continuously defer and block climate action. We, as caring and responsive adults, can help our young people hold this era of fossil fueled planetary change through talking with them, validating their feelings and experiences, and working together for the more healthy, livable, and equitable future that is possible.

Throughout this guide, you will learn about the roots of the climate crisis, how it’s being experienced, and ways to hold climate conversations with young people that are empowering and bring hope through inspired action.

LOCATING OURSELVES: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

We are all born into the world, full of curiosity, awe, and wonder about the beauty, vastness, and detail of the natural world. We experience this connection physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In our modern era, we’ve become socialized into a disconnected, inequitable and unjust relationship with the world, where humans exploit and dominate natural resources and each other. Our work is to locate ourselves in this current moment of climate change, and historically locate ourselves in our cultural and indigenous relationships with each other and the earth.

Imbalanced and unjust power dynamics have resulted in fossil fueled climate change. It has caused people across the U.S. and worldwide to breathe smoke, suffer heat waves, and be displaced by sea level rise. It strengthens hurricanes and flooding, drought, food and water insecurity, disease spread, toxic algae blooms, mass species extinction, and [climate migration](#). It exacerbates existing [health and social inequalities](#). Worldwide, fossil fuel pollution is responsible for [1 in 5 deaths](#), and is linked to numerous [health conditions](#) including asthma, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and adverse birth outcomes. During summer 2021, [1 in 3 people](#) in the United States were affected by a [climate disaster](#). [Children](#) lived through record-shattering temperatures from Portland to Vancouver, BC. Hurricanes and flash floods displaced families from New Orleans to New York, along with 5 million acres of homes and towns razed in wildfires in the West.

While we are all impacted by climate change, people in front line communities and future generations are harmed [first, worst, and longest](#). The world’s richest 0.54% (~42 million people) emit more emissions of greenhouse gases than the poorest half of the global population (~3.6 billion). It is the wealthiest countries, corporations, and people whose actions are causing climate change through high consumption lifestyles, while those who live in the Global South,

as well as Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in developed countries, suffer most from the impacts. Climate disasters are exacerbating existing and ongoing [environmental injustices](#) such as Flint, Michigan’s lead water crisis, toxic air in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, and increased risk of physical harm to [Indigenous women](#) and children living near pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure projects. The harm of the fossil fuel industry falling foremost on peoples of color is rooted in a history and system of colonization, racism, patriarchy, misogyny, and capitalism’s constant push for power, profits, and growth, over people and planet.

A 2021 poll reported that people of color are not only more likely to feel the effects of climate change, but also more likely to take [climate action](#). As the original caretakers, [Indigenous peoples](#) preserve and protect the remaining 36% of earth’s forests and intact ecosystems. While [older generations](#) share care and concern about the climate crisis, [young people](#) are more likely to experience it as a serious threat and to demand system change. Young people today are leading the largest youth movement in history, and are unwilling to continue down a disastrous path. The leadership and moral authority of the young, indigenous, and people of color guides us in building and investing in an intersectional climate movement that will liberate us all.

“When we communicate about the climate crisis, we are so excited talking about the tipping points, the numbers, and the percentages. But we so rarely talk about the people power that can stop it, and how people power has stopped and started things in the past and all those things we can learn from the stories of social movements. Sometimes we expect people to feel empowered by confronting them with climate knowledge. What I think is empowering is climate knowledge combined with knowledge of social change making.”

~ [Luisa Neubauer](#), Youth Climate Activist

FACING OURSELVES, FACING THE FUTURE

Each one of us has something [unique to contribute](#) from where we are right now. We can all affect change from within our existing circles. The places where we hold influence include our schools, work, home, religious/spiritual communities, hobbies, sports, and other recreational organizations, as well as in policy and decision making bodies.

The forces of climate change and inequality have long gone hand-in-hand. The struggle against climate change is also the struggle against inequality. This is even more important as people of color, indigenous peoples, people with lower incomes, and the displaced, are, as we mentioned, those who tend to be harmed first by the effects of climate change. That’s why important actions battling climate change include decarbonization, electrifying everything, reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans, Indigenous land back movements and repatriation, [Water Protector Movement](#), the [Poor People’s Campaigns](#), universal access to quality childcare and preschools, Black and Indigenous maternal health, and housing justice. Work around racial, social, economic, food justice, and other community and civic actions are all forms of climate action. Climate change and the systems of harm that bring it about are all around us. So action is needed at all levels.

Today, everyone is impacted by climate change. Learn about the ways that [climate](#) change affects your community, urban or rural, and what actions you can take individually and



collectively. What you do about climate is going to depend on how you choose to use the resources you have available. This includes your voice, time, energy, relationships and social connections, knowledge, community, social media savvy, and/or finances to make individual and collective changes.

Research shows that taking action in our own community, especially action that others can see or experience, is one of the most effective ways to influence change and counter anxiety. Connecting with local organizations and building community around climate action helps build collective power and resilience. Taking action with others decreases isolation, provides support and connection, and helps build new skills and knowledge. Family-friendly groups taking collective climate action are growing by the day, and include 350.org, Fridays for Future, Sunrise Movement, Parents for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Green New Deal Rising, and Climate Action Families.

“We can’t solve climate change or make it go away. It’s here. But how can we still create the best of all possible futures for the people and the ecosystems and the communities that we love?”

~ Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, PhD

START WHERE YOU ARE

Young people now [experience climate change](#) before they leave the womb and will feel its impacts both emotionally and physically throughout their lives. Talking about climate early and often, in a developmentally guided way, helps build a strong foundation for young people to weather the uncertainty and adversity of our changing world.

Let’s be honest, talking about climate change with young people, or really anyone, can feel daunting and uncertain, especially if we’ve never done it before. Fear that young people will be paralyzed by our climate reality can keep us from starting the conversation. The belief that we aren’t expert “enough” can leave us feeling ill-equipped in even bringing up the topic or answering basic questions. These thoughts and feelings are normal, even amongst scientists studying and communicating about the subject.

Start from the heart. Start by talking about why it matters to us, to begin with genuinely shared values. Do we live in the same community? Do we enjoy the same outdoor activities: hiking, biking, fishing, even hunting? Do we care about the economy or national security?

~ Katharine Hayhoe, PhD, Professor, Director of the Climate Center

You don't need to be an expert to talk climate and empower the young people in your life. As folx who care for, educate, and support young people, you are uniquely equipped to navigate climate conversations. You know who they are developmentally and emotionally, what sensitivities need tending, how to tap into their natural interests, and to center their unique learning and growing style. From this foundation, you can help them hold, express and work through difficult thoughts, feelings, and uncertainties that often arise. They need us to help them understand how their climate is changing, and to join them in envisioning, and advocating for, a stable and healthy climate, planet, and society.



CONNECT WITH YOUR FEELINGS, SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE, AND PLACES

Help young people with their [emotions](#) by first taking time to [tend to your own](#). By tending to our feelings first, we increase our capacity to hold space and be present with young people. Emotions and feelings that come with knowing the facts and experiencing climate change can include anger, anxiety, [grief](#), feelings of helplessness, courage, possibility, and motivation. These are healthy and natural responses to new and difficult information.

Two key ways to process feelings and concerns about climate change include checking in with yourself, and talking with people who love and care about you. Other ways to foster support include surrounding yourself with people who share your concerns and motivation to take climate action; staying engaged with activities that nurture and bring you joy; making time to quiet your mind; moving and nourishing your body; and spending time in nature. Some supportive spaces for adults to share concerns and get emotional support with one another are [Climate Cafés](#), a [Climate Emotions Conversation](#), or a [Work That Reconnects Group](#). Speak with your healthcare provider if you or the young people you support experience overwhelming anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, or whatever interferes with your ability to engage in daily life. A directory of climate-aware mental health providers can be found [here](#).

RESPOND DEVELOPMENTALLY

Young people are the most important people to talk climate with because they are inheriting the world and recognize how much is at stake. Understanding where young people are developmentally can help us meet them where they are and tend to their needs.

Preschoolers are falling in love with their world and learning the building blocks of what it means to be in community. Many of us are already doing the most important things, which are modeling language, and building an understanding of how we see and treat others and our world in a just and equitable society. We can cultivate preschoolers' love and connection to the earth by playing in nature, engaging the senses, and learning about ecosystems, life cycles, and seasons. As preschoolers develop their sense of self and notice differences, we can build a culture of care by supporting them with practicing consent and acknowledging, honoring, and valuing human and cultural diversity.

“The earth has shared generously with us, so we need to model that in return.”
~ *Robin Wall Kimmerer, mother, scientist, professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation*

Elementary-aged kids are learning about cause and effect alongside basic science. They are beginning to understand the bigger climate picture as they gain information. They may express upset through physical symptoms, such as a stomach ache or headache, more than in words. Support emotional resilience by talking about feelings and how to cope through healthy expression and positive outlets. Around age 7, focus on opportunities to engage in shared action and highlight stories of climate recovery. Share stories of change makers, especially those who stand up to injustice, speak truth to power, and who embody a culture of care. Invite creativity and natural problem solving abilities into identifying



actions to take at home, school, and in community. Use movement, art, music, play, and storytelling to help [imagine](#) and create a healthier and more just world together. Avoid messages that elicit hopelessness, as this can foster anxiety alongside a fear of nature.

“Kids tend to be more curious, more open, more able to access creative expression through art.”

~ Leslie Davenport, LMFT, Author of All the Feelings Under the Sun

Tweens and Teens are generally concerned with the world outside of home and are looking toward the future. They have moral clarity about the systemic injustice, and are demanding a just, equitable, and livable world. Adults can help build on teens’ inborn desire to take action and to become independent leaders who are driving their own climate actions. As adults our job is to say 'yes' and find ways to support their ideas. Young people are motivated by peer social interactions and often find satisfaction engaging in projects and actions where they can make a difference together. These can include starting or organizing with a youth climate action organization alongside friends and peers, such as: the [Sunrise Movement](#), [Fridays for Future](#), or [Zero Hour](#), [Rise Up](#), and the [Green Generation Initiative](#). For teens already engaged in social justice groups and actions, such as at school, talk about how these are already vital forms of climate action. Support them in bringing climate action into their existing groups and activities such as 4H, Girl Scouts, outdoor sports, or academic clubs - remember, climate touches everything. Other activities that amplify climate action include creating art, music, or stories with a climate or justice theme.

Engaging in climate action is often a [protective factor](#) for mental well-being, [adolescents](#) appear to be more vulnerable to climate related anxiety, depression, and suicidal thinking than younger children. Building a healthy, adaptive relationship with the facts of our changing climate is basically a required skill for adulthood in this climate era. Our responsibility as adults is to help the next generations stay informed while also working through the forms of grief that comes with knowing the facts and experiencing climate change. Adults can help connect teens who are exhibiting concerning changes in mood, behavior, or functioning to mental health supports. If you think a teen is at-risk, look for [warning signs](#) of teen suicide and seek immediate [help](#).

TALK CLIMATE: CONNECTING IN CONVERSATION

For many of us, getting started in these conversations can be the hardest part. Here are ways to invite young people into conversation and keep the door open for questions and support over time.

Give an Open Invitation: Calm and unpressured spaces help us to be more relaxed and present with new, uncomfortable, or unfamiliar conversations. Giving a heads up and offering choice, especially if this is the first time we are bringing up climate change, communicates that we are ready to listen and be present to whatever comes up. And there are times when an opportunity to talk climate presents itself and just starting it is good enough.

“I’m wondering what you know or have heard about climate change?”



*“I’m hearing more about climate change and realize we don’t talk about it.
What do you think about it?”*

Maintain Curiosity: People hold different understandings about climate change and our responses to climate change vary. Holding curiosity allows us to witness another’s experience without making assumptions. From here, we can listen to and validate emotions and concerns without denying or minimizing. With young people, one way to support their curiosity is to get ahead of [myths](#) and [climate disinformation](#) before they get internalized.

*“I know you’re frustrated that you can’t play outside because of the smoke in the air.
Do you want to talk about that?”*

*“I see that you’re (angry/scared/motivated) about this issue. Would you like to think about
some way we can take action or make a difference together?”*

Follow Their Lead: Ask, listen, and watch for how much they are ready to hear and discuss. Start with bite-sized, digestible information, and be available to answer questions as they crop up. Acknowledge your own uncertainties, and be a partner in thinking things through. These are changing times and confusion is part of the process. Join in seeking answers by doing research together and learning. Be ready to end the conversation when they are. If they stop participating or have no more questions, it might be the right time to pause. Tell them you’re ready to talk any time they are. It’s natural and healthy for people, especially young kids, to engage, disengage, and re-engage.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to learn more about it with you. “Do you want to know more?”

“I’m wondering if this is a good time to stop talking about this for now?”

Hold a Secure Space: We need our young people and they need us. We aid their natural growth towards increasing independence by supporting how they face climate change, and by supporting their actions for a more caring, just, and sustainable world. Validate difficult emotions and experiences, and help to shift into empowered, creative action. Showing that we care, and that many adults and young people are working to address climate change, helps to soften their fear. Bring attention to positive and motivating stories of restoration and climate action. Celebrate and acknowledge climate actions. Together, act with curiosity and bring it into community.



ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

In order to make the necessary systemic changes, to soften the impacts of climate change and protect our future, we need everyone to actively work toward shifting culture. Cultural change comes from engaging, with frequent conversations, education, research, advocacy, actions, art, and activism. Below are a some ways to help the change:

1. **Talk Climate!** Research shows that talking about climate change within our sphere of influence, including with people at work, school, and with [family](#), friends, and in our neighborhoods and communities, is the most important thing we can do to promote action for climate justice.
2. **Empower Yourself and Young People!** Voice your climate concerns and ask for the specific changes you want from those in power. This can include voicing concerns and advocating for change with corporations, town or city governments, and utility providers, etc. Research shows young people are influential in shifting the adults in their lives and views on climate. Involve and support students and young people in community and civic action, including modeling or supporting civic engagement with politicians and decision makers.
3. **Climate Justice!** As Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate said, “We cannot achieve climate justice without [racial justice](#).” **Due to systems of oppression that govern social, political, and economic dynamics among people, places, and spaces, people of color, poor folk, those with disabilities, and the young and the old are especially impacted by climate change.** Addressing long-standing systems of injustice are critical for getting to the root causes of climate change and helping those experiencing the greatest impact already. Elevate and participate in groups addressing systemic injustice, including racial, economic, and housing.
4. **System Change!** It is systemic change that will ultimately allow us to address the climate crisis at a necessary scale. Learn about the power of social movements and get inspired. At the same time, our individual choices have a ripple effect within our social circles. This shifts culture to affect the [systemic changes](#) needed to address the climate crisis.
5. **Protect and Restore Nature!** Participate in projects and programs that repair and bring improvements in health to people and the planet. These can include community tree plantings, tree preservation, removal of invasive species, and garbage pickup events. Join a ‘citizen scientist’ group to collect information aimed at improving the health of communities, and of land, air, and water. Participate in or donate to food justice projects such as pea patches, food forests, and community-led farms. Encourage your town or city to adopt a school garden program and landscape practices that include native species or plants that can adapt to your changing climate (such as drought-tolerant, fire-resistant, heat-tolerant, pollution-tolerant plants and trees). If you have a lawn, explore ways to make it more climate-friendly such as: adding a vegetable garden or fruit trees; adding plants that support birds, bees, and butterflies; or installing a rain garden to protect waterways from pollutant runoff.



6. Personal Choices Ripple Out to System Change!

- Reduce gas fueled transportation including air and auto travel
 - Take a train or road trip instead of flying - explore your region
 - Make your next car 100% electric, and push for electric public transport
 - Bicycle, and advocate for more protected bike lanes, trails, and walkable neighborhoods
- Adopt a planet friendly diet
 - Eat local and organic as much as possible, and ask your school or work to offer organic and local options.
 - Reduce or stop eating meat and dairy, and ask your school or workplace to offer more healthy, dairy-free and meat-free protein options.
 - Start a garden or join a community garden.
- Reduce food waste
 - Plan meals and get creative with leftovers.
 - Groups like Buy Nothing can connect you with neighbors to share extra food or products.
 - Ask your city to offer composting service, or compost in your yard or community garden.
- Shift to renewable power and electric appliances
 - The most efficient cooking is electric induction.
 - Electric Heat Pumps are most efficient for heating and air conditioning.
 - Solar has dropped in price by more than half in a decade. Ask your city or state to build solar and wind energy that everyone can benefit from, and if you can afford to, install solar on your roof.
- Civic and Community Engagement
 - Vote with climate in mind and encourage others to vote
 - Talk about climate with your friends and family
 - Give donations of time or funds to local health and climate justice organization
 - Engage in mutual aid and other actions that support equitable distribution of resources

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CLIMATE COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

Articles

[Anxiety about climate change isn't going away. Here's how you can manage it](#) (NPR, 2021)
[Here's how to talk with your kids about climate anxiety](#) (Grist, 2021)
[How to talk to our kids about climate change \(without freaking them out\)](#) (Romper, 2021)
[How to talk to kids about climate change in an era of climate crisis](#) (Good Housekeeping, 2020)
[How to talk to kids about climate change](#) (NPR, 2021)
[Your guide to talking with kids of all ages about climate change](#) (NRDC, 2019)
[Here's what I've learned from teens talking about climate change](#) (Inverse, 2019)
[How to talk to kids about climate change \(and have fun, too\)](#) (Yes! Solutions Journalism, 2019)
[How to talk with your kids about climate change without giving them anxiety](#) (Huffpost, 2019)
[How to talk to kids about climate change](#) (Mother's Kid Vintage for the Planet)
[Child Honouring](#) (Raffi Foundation)

Youth Authored Books

[A Bigger Picture](#) (Vanessa Nakate, 2021)
[Youth to Power](#) (Jamie Margolin, 2020)
[A Kids Book About Climate Change](#) (Zanagee Artis and Olivia Greenspan, 2020)
[Our House is on Fire](#) (Greta Thunberg, 2019)
[No One is Too Small to Make a Difference](#) (Greta Thunberg, 2019)

Books for Adults Supporting Young People

[All the Feelings Under the Sun](#) (2021)
[How to Talk to Your Kids About Climate Change: Turning Angst Into Action](#) (2020)
[The Parents' Guide to the Climate Revolution](#) (2018)

Additional Books

[All We Can Save](#) (2020)
[A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety](#) (2020)
[Braiding Sweetgrass](#) (2013)
[Active Hope](#) (2012)
[Child Honouring](#) (2006)
[Raising Children in the Midst of Global Crisis](#) (coming soon)
[Generation Dread](#) (coming soon)

