



Talk Climate: General Developmental Handout

Start Where You Are

Climate change is deeply concerning for kids and grown-ups alike. Anxiety, anger, grief and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are natural responses. Help your child with their emotions by first taking time to tend to your own. This includes checking in with yourself and talking with friends, family, and community about how you are feeling and what concerns you. Speak with your healthcare provider if you or your child experience anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, or whatever interferes with your ability to engage in daily life.

"In the face of climate change, hope only comes in the form of action."

~ [Jamie Margolin](#), 17, Zero Hour Founder

Counter climate anxiety with climate action. Research shows that taking action that others can hear or see, or being a 'block leader' in your community, is one of the most effective ways to influence change. Each of us has something unique to contribute from where we are right now. Each of us can affect change from within our own existing circles. The circles we can most influence include our schools, work, home, religious/spiritual communities, hobbies, sports, and other recreational organizations. Some family-friendly activism groups include 350.org, Fridays for Future, Parents for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Climate Action Families. Connect with a local organization and build community around climate action. This will decrease isolation and increase connection and support.

All of us are impacted by climate change today. Learn about the ways that [climate](#) change affects your community, urban or rural, and what actions you can take individually and collectively. How you take action on climate is going to depend on how you choose to use the resources you have available for climate action. This includes your voice, time, energy, and/or finances to make individual and collective changes.

Climate change impacts people in front line communities who are already vulnerable today and future generations who cannot yet speak for themselves. The richest 0.54% (~42 million people) in the world 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 in the world whose actions are causing climate change through high consumption lifestyles, and those who live in the Global South, and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, who suffer most from the impacts. Sea level rise, ocean acidification, and global warming are exacerbating air pollution, heatwaves, disease spread, hurricanes, fires, flooding, drought, food insecurity, mass extinction, and [driving climate migration](#).

"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

Laying a Foundation

Let's be honest, talking about climate change with kids or adults can feel scary and uncertain, especially if we've never done it before. Worry that we will scare people, especially children, with climate information can stop us in our tracks. 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 feelings are normal, even amongst scientists studying climate change! The reality is, kids are going to hear about climate change sooner rather than later, and you don't need to be an expert to talk with them about climate change. Talking about climate early and often, in a developmentally guided way, helps build a strong foundation for them to weather the uncertainty and adversity of our changing world.

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*

As a parent, caregiver, teacher, or mentor of children in your family and community, 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. This is foundational to helping 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 their role in advocating for a stable and healthy climate, planet, and society.

Respond with Developmental-Attunement

Preschoolers are developmentally falling in love with the natural world and understanding their connection to it. This is a time to build awareness of ecosystems and connections between them, and all of us. Participate in activities such as tree plantings or park clean-ups, which emphasize the message that earth is our shared home that we love and care for.

Elementary-aged kids are learning cause and effect alongside basic science. Around age 7, focus on how actions can make a difference. Invite kids' natural problem solving abilities into making greener decisions and traditions at home, school and in community, such as gardening, camps, and clubs. Avoid messages that may elicit hopelessness, as research shows this can foster anxiety and fear of the natural world. Use art, music, and storytelling to help kids imagine and create a healthier and more just world.

Tweens and Teens are generally concerned with the world outside of home and are exercising independence. Adults can help them build on their innate desire to lead and take action. Teens and tweens are at a natural developmental stage to become independent leaders and drive their own climate actions with the support of adults in their lives. 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. Actions can include joining or starting a youth climate action organization with friends and peers such as: Sunrise, Fridays for Future, or Zero Hour. Other actions include creating art, music, or stories with a climate or justice theme. Our role as adults is to find supportive ways to say ‘yes’ and to empower their ideas and projects.

While 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 suicidality than younger children. Adults need to 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](#). That said, building a healthy, adaptive relationship with the facts of our changing climate, is basically a required skill for adulthood in the climate era. Our responsibility as adults is to help the next generations stay informed while also processing the forms of grief that comes with knowing the facts and experiencing climate change.

Let’s Talk Climate

Talking about climate change can feel just as uncomfortable as talking about sex with young people. For many of us, getting started 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: New and unfamiliar conversations benefit when supported by calm and unpressured spaces. 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. Sometimes just starting the conversation is a good enough first step.

*“Climate change is a big and difficult subject, and it’s important that we discuss it.
Would it be ok if we talk about it now?”*

*“I’m hearing more climate change on the news and realize we don’t talk about it.
Is now an ok time?”*

Maintain curiosity: People hold a variety of understandings about and responses to climate change. Holding curiosity allows us to hear and witness another’s experience without making assumptions. From here, we can listen to and validate emotions and concerns without denying, correcting, or minimizing.

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

“I hear you’re worried about worsening wildfires, I am too.”

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 your child in seeking answers by doing research together and learning more. 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 kids to engage, disengage, and re-engage.

"Do you want to know more?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to learn more about it with you."

"I'm wondering if you are ready 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 toward independence through supporting how they face climate change and by supporting their actions toward a more just and sustainable world. Validate difficult emotions and experiences, and help to shift into empowered, creative action. Together, act with curiosity and bring it into community. Bring attention to positive and motivating stories of restoration and climate action. Celebrate and acknowledge climate actions.

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 few ways you to contribute to collective action and address climate 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 climate action.
2. **Climate Justice!** Elevate and participate in groups addressing systemic injustice, including racial, economic, and housing. As Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate said, "We cannot achieve climate justice without racial justice." 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.
3. **System Change!** It is systemic change that will ultimately allow us to address the climate crisis. At the same time, our individual choices have a ripple effect within our social circles. That shifts culture to affect the systemic changes needed to address the climate crisis.
4. **Empower Yourself and Young People!** Voice your climate concerns and ask for the specific changes you want from those in power. Research shows young people are influential in shifting the adults in their lives' views on climate. Involve and



support students and young people in community and civic action, and in developing relationships with politicians and decision makers.

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. **Individual 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 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.
 - 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.



Additional Climate Communication Resources for Caregivers

Articles

[Here's how to talk with your kids about climate anxiety](#) (Grist, 2021)

[Here's 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 \(and have fun, too\)](#) (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)

Books

[How to Talk to Your Kids About Climate Change: Turning Angst Into Action](#) (2020)

[The Parents' Guide to the Climate Revolution](#) (2018)

[Raising Children in the Midst of Global Crisis](#) (coming soon)

Created Feb 27, 2021 (updated 4/30/2021)

Megan Slade, MA, LMHC

Diana Gergel, PhD

Daniel Masler, PsyD, MLIS

Sarah Myhre, PhD

Erin Schoenfelder, PhD

Heather Price, PhD

