

How to talk to children about climate change

A hands-on toolkit for parents and caregivers



Why do I need to talk to my children about climate change?

Climate change is one of the most urgent and pervasive health threats of our time. One in four kids are 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change and 38% experience high psychological distress.

These can be tough conversations to have with your children. But it's important that you talk about it.

If you're feeling worried about climate change, chances are they are too.

This toolkit is designed to help you understand your children's feelings, engage them in conversation, and work together to build resilience for the future.



What you'll find in this toolkit

Starting the conversation

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You don't need to know everything about climate change to help children understand the facts or work through difficult feelings. Here are several strategies to help you navigate the conversation.

Turning ideas into action

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For young children

This drawing activity encourages children to think about positive, daily ways they can help the planet.

For teenagers

You can help older children align their values and goals for climate action, to build meaning and hope for the future.

Taking care of yourself

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For parents and caregivers

We have compiled a list of resources and tips to help you develop personal resilience in the face of the climate crisis.





Starting the conversation



The best way to find out if your children are ready to talk about climate change is to listen to them.

Many children already know about climate change and other environmental issues from school or the media. It's important to respond to their questions and comments about climate change with simple but honest answers – and be ready to follow-up your answers with more details if they ask for more.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Why can't I have a longer shower?

"We have to save water because we haven't had as much rain as usual this year because the climate is changing."

Will it be too hot to go outside when I'm grown up?

"The Earth is getting hotter because we have used too much stuff like petrol, gas, and plastic, but there are lots of things we can do to stop this getting worse."

We watched a video at school about the Great Barrier Reef dying.

"It's very sad to see beautiful parts of nature dying. Did your teacher explain why this is happening? Do you have any questions for me?"

Why do we have to ride our bikes? I want to go in the car.

“We’re riding because that means we’re not burning fossil fuels today, and that’s doing something to help reduce climate change. It’s a good way to keep us both strong and healthy.”

Why isn’t anybody trying to fix this? It makes me so angry.

“It’s very normal to feel angry, but there are lots of people trying to help. Let’s talk about how you can feel better, and what we can do to make sure the earth will be a good place for us to live.”

I heard that the climate is changing and I’m scared about what might happen.

“It’s understandable you’re feeling that way, thank you for telling me, what do you feel scared about?”



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things to keep in mind



Recognise their emotions

Emotion-focused coping refers to focusing on the emotions attached to the problem, rather than focusing on the problem itself. If you notice your child is talking a lot about the environment, or appears distressed, try to help them to label their feelings and discuss these to help you understand what might be causing the distress. For example, “You seem upset/scared, can you tell me what you’re worried about?”.

Acknowledge that they are not alone in experiencing these emotions, and practice techniques like slow breathing, self-talk (E.g., saying things to themselves like “take it easy”), or tensing muscles like a robot then relaxing them like a rag doll. These are important skills called emotion regulation which can be useful in many aspects of life.



Use familiar examples

People around the world are working hard to combat the effects of climate change. But we can also do things around the house or at school to connect, make change and feel in control. This is called solution-focused coping and encourages children that there are ways to help the environment. Think about what you are already doing that contributes to a healthier planet, or easy things you can change, like composting your food scraps or picking up rubbish when you go for a walk in the park.



Stay open and practical

Try to open conversations about climate change with a positive follow-up action prepared, no matter how small. It could be a walk outside to connect with your local pocket of nature, watching an age-appropriate documentary together, joining a clean-up event, or looking up local community activities to act alongside others.

Remember, if your child never raises the issue, it may be because they know nothing about it, or they are too anxious to raise it. Be patient and listen to their questions and needs.





Turning ideas into action



For younger children

When speaking to children in pre- or primary school about a topic like climate change, it's important to use age-appropriate language and focus on practical, positive solutions – and remind them that you are in this together! There are many ways you can nurture their sense of care and connection to the environment.

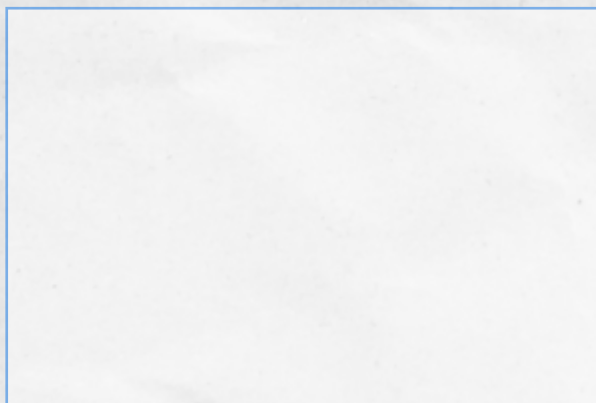
- Share your love for the natural world with them
- Talk about things you can do together like picnics, swimming, and picking up rubbish
- Read books to or with them about climate change or environmental problems like 'The Magic School Bus and the Climate Challenge' by Joanna Cole, 'The Lorax', by Dr Zeuss, or 'Down-to-Earth Guide To Global Warming', by Laurie David

Interactive drawing exercise

Click [here](#) or scan this QR code to download and print our activity sheet to help children think about the daily ways they can make a difference and connect with a healthier planet. Check it out on the next page.



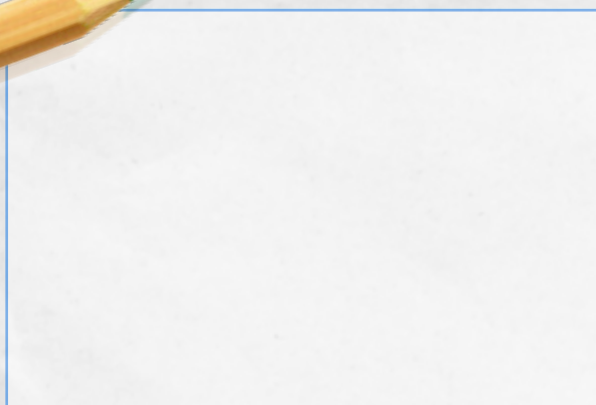
I can help the planet by...



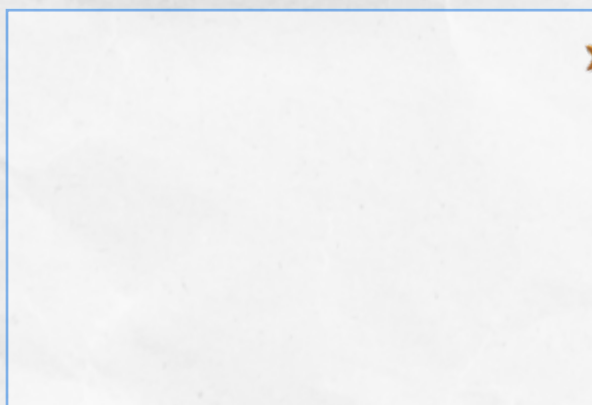
Putting food scraps in the compost bin to help the worms grow veggies and flowers




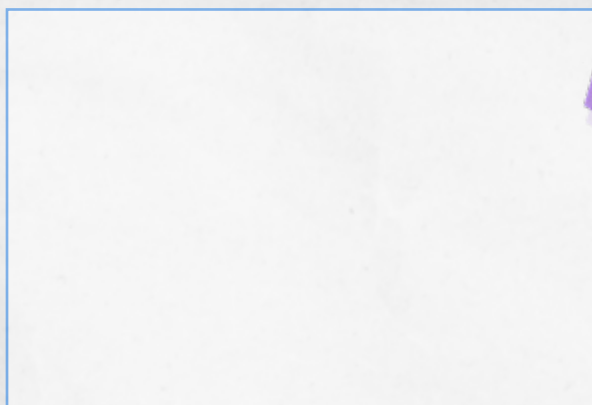
Taking the train instead of using petrol in the car



Bringing our own bags to the shops instead of using the plastic bags







For older kids and teenagers

Some teenagers may welcome long conversations about climate change at the dinner table. Others may feel cynical or despairing about finding a solution and want to avoid talking about it.

With older children you might want to lean into meaning-focused coping strategies, which help us evoke positive emotions about a situation by drawing on our beliefs, values, and goals. Seeking the benefits in a challenging situation – particularly when it is out of our control – is a powerful tool for navigating feelings around climate change. Read on for other things you can try.





Consider how you can help them learn more and be an agent for change in their community. After all, to solve climate change, and live in a climate-changed world, we need to be closely engaged with our communities.



Research the science of climate change together, and don't be afraid to let them educate you

Help them engage meaningfully with their neighbours

Don't be afraid to talk about the political side – together you might analyse different parties' positions on climate change

Help them to be a 'joiner' by volunteering in community groups and teams

Encourage hopefulness by acknowledging the breadth of innovation, research and climate action happening around the world

Talk about healthy social media habits. Help them identify the balance between staying informed and knowing when to disconnect.

Discuss ways they could help their local and global communities, like asking their school to bring in speakers who can raise awareness, or engaging with their local government





Taking care of yourself



For parents and caregivers

It's likely that you also have a lot of feelings about climate change, including anxiety, anger, sadness, grief, guilt or fear.

Sometimes learning more about a topic can increase feelings of distress. However, education is key, because it gives us a tool to understand what is happening and how we can respond.

It's important to acknowledge your feelings, then seek out coping strategies to help decrease anxiety about the situation and keep moving forward.



Here are a few things to try:



Talk about it. Repressing emotions can impact our mood and energy levels. But when we are able to tell the truth about what we know, see and feel is happening to our world, we often feel transformed, and have increased determination and energy to act.



Spend time in nature. This helps you to calm down, reduce stress and feel happier. It's also a great way to remind yourself of all the great parts of nature. Doing this with your children is great for their development, too.



Connect with your community. Join a group or social hobby like hiking, community gardening, or thrifting to connect with other concerned people and support each other in addressing the climate crisis.



Take action on the problems that concern you. This is a very good way of helping yourself to deal with distress.



Practice self-compassion. Try to accept your feelings rather than judging or denying them. Remember, you are not alone in feeling this way, and we are all facing this together.



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Youth Survey Shows Need for Action on Impact of Climate Change Concerns on Youth Mental Health, Mission Australia, April 2023

This eBook has been developed based on the previous APS resource 'A guide for parents about the climate crisis', 2018.



Climate change is an issue impacting every member of our community.

By having these conversations you're contributing to a more mentally resilient, future-ready Australia.

For more resources and tips for mindfulness, head to our website:

psychology.org.au

