

Appendix to Guide 3: Talking with Children About Climate and Nature Crisis

Research suggests that around two thirds of children aged 11 to 16 are experiencing distress around the climate and ecological crisis¹. Their feelings vary widely: worry, anger, grief, a sense of loss, or a kind of numbness that can be hard to name. Many are carrying these feelings silently, often not because they don't want to talk, but because they aren't sure the adults around them can bear to hear it, or that their worries will be dismissed.

Parents, guardians and educators are faced with this as a challenge on an almost daily basis and come to us with lots of questions about what to say, when, how much, how truthful should they be, how can they avoid distressing children, and many more.

There are three key questions that can be useful for you to explore on this:

1. Have you been able to process some of your feelings in relation to what it means to parent or care for children during a time of climate breakdown?
2. What conversations (if any) are you already having with your child about climate change and ecological crisis?
3. How able and prepared are you to support your child if they become distressed?

1. Have you faced your own feelings about climate change yet?

Before you can help your child with their feelings about climate change and ecological crisis, it helps to have acknowledged and begun to process your own responses. The issues can bring up very painful emotions in us all - for example, shock, numbness, powerlessness, grief, anger, terror, despair, and even being ashamed of the part we have (often unknowingly) played in the state of our planet. Many people avoid thinking or feeling about it because it's all too much.

These are normal and understandable responses, and often we unconsciously set these feelings aside so we can carry on with daily life. We may pretend it's not happening, or it's "not that bad", so we don't talk or even think about it. Whole segments of society are doing the same. Unacknowledged and unprocessed feelings can lead us to further avoid reality - yet sooner or later we will be facing more of the impacts.

Finding ways to come to terms with it ourselves is the first step towards moving through, towards a more helpful response. The more supported you feel, the more you can offer your child because you need to have faced it enough yourself to be present and supportive when they bring it to you. **But if you haven't yet taken in the reality of the climate and ecological crisis, we strongly advise caution in raising it with children.** Find ways to take it in, discuss it with other adults, take time to process it. You may also have painful feelings in relation to being a parent at this time, and it can sometimes be more painful to process feelings relating to the impact of climate breakdown on children we care for.

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So you might consider who else you can talk to, and if not your friends and family, perhaps people in climate and nature action groups, or by going to a confidential Climate Cafe Listening Circle or Parenting Circle such as those run by the Climate Psychology Alliance.

2. What conversations (if any) are you already having with your child about the climate and nature crisis?

Some people have faced their own feelings but avoid the subject with their children (or brush over their children's worries) out of a wish to protect them or because they don't know what to say or how to say it. That's completely understandable.

Children are perceptive. They often know something is wrong and sense when an adult is not quite ready to go there, and so they don't bring it up unless invited. They protect us. Yet if we leave our children to face this alone, we are abandoning them at exactly the moment they need us most.

Age-appropriate sharing of climate crisis information involves tailoring the conversation to a child's developmental stage, focusing on empowerment, fostering a connection with nature, and balancing honesty with hope. It involves listening to their thoughts and feelings, validating all their emotional responses, and not jumping straight into discussing action or giving false hope. It is important to emphasise that children are not responsible for the climate crisis and show ways that you and powerful adults around the child are trying to take steps to protect their future. Experts generally recommend starting conversations about positive nature connection early in life, moving to simple, concrete facts in primary school, and discussing systemic solutions with teenagers. You don't need to have all the answers or know all the science - indeed, tolerance of uncertainty is important for all of us when it comes to the climate crisis - but it is important to listen and think about issues they bring to you, whatever their age.

3) How able and prepared are you to support your child if they become distressed about climate?

There are many sources of information about what it is like being a child during these times. Firstly it is important to consider what children might be feeling. Naturally each child is unique and may be at a different development stage than other children of similar ages, so these are just considerations.

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Teenagers

Teenagers often have some understanding of the science and the scale of the crisis, which can make their feelings more intense than those of younger children. In teenagers you might notice:

- Them expressing worry or fear about the future, including questioning the point of education or qualifications
- Anger at governments, corporations or the adults around them for not doing enough
- Grief and sadness about what's already being lost - species, habitats, landscapes, ecosystems, their vision of the future
- Moral injury, a deep sense of injustice about the world they are inheriting
- Helplessness and the feeling that nothing they do will make any difference
- Numbness or withdrawal, which can be a way of coping when feelings become overwhelming.

All of these are normal responses to an abnormal situation. Your role is not to make those feelings disappear but to help your teenager know they are not alone with them. You don't need a script, and you don't need to be a scientist, or have all the answers. Choosing low-pressure moments to talk often works better than a formal sit-down conversation - a walk, a car journey, cooking together - can all open the door.

- Ask open, gentle questions. "What do you think about what's happening with the climate? How do you feel about it?"
- Let them lead. Find out what they know and feel before you offer anything of your own.
- Give them your full attention, so they can say whatever they need to.
- Resist the urge to soothe or fix straight away. Let them feel heard first. Validate and normalise their emotions and avoid jumping straight into answering or giving advice.
- Share some of your own feelings honestly when it feels right, without unduly burdening them. Knowing that you find it hard sometimes too can be a real relief to them.
- If they ask difficult questions, like whether it's too late or what the point is, try to be honest rather than simply reassuring. Acknowledge what's hard and then offer some balance. For every difficult thing, there are also real examples of action, change and reasons for hope. "Yes, and" is more supportive than "Yes, but". For example, "Yes, it can feel scary. I understand. And there are lots of people doing impactful things such as ... ". This doesn't dismiss what they are saying or feeling - it acknowledges whilst adding something. "Yes but" can feel dismissive.
- It's fine to say you don't know. You can look things up together afterwards and find ways to discover what solutions are being worked on.

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Young people between 12 and 16 may or may not be ready to engage with the reality of climate change - it depends on their development as an individual and how well supported they are in their life. It can also be harder to engage with the realities of the climate crisis if they are struggling with other threats such as bullying or challenges fitting in with peer group demands. If they are ready the goal is not to shield them from difficult information, but to make sure they encounter it in a way that is balanced, contextualised, and accompanied by space to process their feelings. This can include documentaries about science, activism or community solutions, climate-themed fiction, a limited amount of news and current affairs, involvement in local or school campaigning, visiting rewilding projects and more. Time in nature makes a genuine difference; many children now spend as little as eight and a half minutes outdoors each day, well below the recommended hour. Finding ways to build more of that into their week, and yours, is worth doing.

Research consistently shows that doing something, even something small, helps. Ask your teenager what feels most important to them. There are things you can suggest too but do let your child lead in their decisions. It is also important to remember that they are not responsible for this situation, it is the adults (of this and previous generations) who are. Neither are they responsible for “tackling” it or coming up with solutions - they need to see those with power acting around them in meaningful ways, and that includes parents, guardians and educators.

The key difference from younger children is that teenagers benefit from honest engagement with space to feel heard and their feelings validated, rather than protection from material that can invoke strong emotions. They don’t necessarily need more information, but they need others around them to hear and validate their experiences. They need to see others taking action and feel empowered to make changes as part of a collective.

Younger children

A recent survey found that - nearly four in five primary-aged children (under 12s) were worried about climate change, while teachers say they face challenges in supporting children distressed by the climate emergency.²

Younger children have different needs from teenagers – those under 12 are still developing more basic cognitive and emotional tools needed to process frightening content. In younger children you might notice:

- Expressing worry or fear about the future – perhaps in a vague way
- Asking questions about safety, sometimes quite stark ones like “are we going to die?”
- Grief and sadness about animals and lost species
- Difficulty sleeping, or having bad dreams
- Fearful feelings coming out in their art or play, behaviour or mood including withdrawal, which can be a way of coping when feelings become overwhelming.

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Many younger children engage in "magical thinking" where they make their own interpretations, for example, imagining that events on screen are happening nearby or are about to happen to them. They typically lack the emotional regulation skills to contextualise such imagery, and distressing content can lead to persistent fear, nightmares, or difficulty sleeping. For this age group, gentler, age-appropriate introductions to environmental themes are far more likely to build awareness and resilience without causing lasting harm than watching films about extreme weather or listening to climate science talks.

For most young children and teenagers, these feelings can be worked through with good support at home where their parents / guardians have fully considered how they can listen, support and what resources the child might need. If their distress seems to be affecting daily life or they appear really low, we encourage you to find out what expertise and support is available at their school (if any - some schools and educators are not yet equipped or skilled in this), talk to your GP (again, please note not all are equipped or skilled, and some may even pathologize climate distress), or contact any number of organisations that are focused on supporting children, young people and families. Here are just a few.

Resources

[Parent/Carer Circles](#) from the Climate Psychology Alliance – support for you

[One to One support](#) (free) from the Climate Psychology Alliance

[Support for Young People](#) from the Climate Psychology Alliance

[How to Talk to Children About Climate Change](#) from Save the Children

[How to Talk to Children About Climate Change](#) from the BBC

[How to Talk to Your Kids About the Climate Crisis](#) from Greenpeace (particularly good for younger children)

References

- [Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey](#)
- <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/majority-of-under-12s-worried-about-climate-change-survey-shows/>

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