



How to talk to children and young people about climate change



At World's Largest Lesson we believe in empowering children and young people to make positive change in their lives, in their communities and ultimately throughout the whole world. One of the many complex issues that young people face today is climate change. Whether it be through social media, the news, coming up in conversation with friends, children today are growing up with a realisation that our natural world is changing in frightening ways. In 2020 alone, there have been record breaking floods, wildfires, locust swarms and hurricanes. The sheer scale of these tragedies can be overwhelming. However, the way you talk and communicate about them does not need to be.

In the following guide we share some of our top tips for speaking to children and young people about climate change. We believe in having honest conversations that give hope whilst not ignoring the reality and scale of the problem.

Main themes

1. Optimism & hope
2. Change the narrative
3. Change thinking
4. Get outside!

1. Optimism & Hope

- As a general rule of thumb follow the formula that for every problem you discuss, show a solution. This helps to reinforce the message that urgency is needed in addressing climate change and that they work when you do.
- Spend 15 mins researching good news stories to share and discuss with students.
- Accounts we love following for positive climate and nature news stories are:

[@Mongabay](#)

[@Waterbearnetwork](#)

[@EarthDayNetwork](#)

- Immerse young people in the stories of climate change activists. There are so many incredible young people who are standing up and fighting for our planet. Knowing about and hearing from young people that resonate with your students, will really help them to feel less alone in their anxiety around climate change.
- In our [Call to Learning for Climate Education](#) film we hear from incredible young activists around the world. Check out their social handles below to share and explore with students:

[Melati Wijsen - @MelatiWijsen](#)

[Jack Harries - @JackHarries](#)

[Helena Gualinga - @HelenaGualinga](#)

[Adenike Oladosu - @an_ecofeminist](#)

[Dante Vergara - YouTube channel: Bichología](#)

[Nkosi Nyathi](#)

2. Change the narrative around messaging

- Young people have grown up with images of melting ice caps & starving polar bears, but many of these stereotypical images of climate change can feel unrelatable and distant. Although these images highlight the problems of climate change, they do so in a way that feels alien and foreign to many students, who may have limited contact with nature, let alone a polar bear.
- To combat this, use messaging and narrative stories that will resonate with your students. We recommend [Climate Visuals](#), who have created a compelling and diverse visual language for climate change. Based on international social research in Europe and the US, they have compiled seven core principles for effective visual communication, plus a library of images. It's a great resource to help students to vocalise their thoughts and feelings around climate change.

3. Change thinking

- **Encourage diverse thinking.** Encourage young people to recognise that different communities need different actions and we can't assume a blanket action for everyone. For example, whilst using a reusable water bottle might work in your classroom, for others where clean running water isn't an option, plastic bottles might be the only source of clean water.
- **Collective action & systems change learning is important.** When thinking about tackling climate change, we often feel that it is up to individuals to make behaviour changes that will help tackle the crisis. However, it's important to think about how collective action also plays a vital role in solving this crisis. As Dowdell & Hall found in their 2018 study "a gap in educational curriculum regarding the role of collective, organized action in social change, including the skills - both with social media and on the ground - required to participate in such action." Writing to business leaders, local elected officials and community leaders should be encouraged amongst young people as a way of bringing in larger, systemic change.
- **Encourage children to get involved in their local communities;** they'll feel more connected to local issues
- **Acknowledge student emotions.** Young people can often find climate change overwhelming and leads to "eco-anxiety", with many youth feeling isolated in their concern for climate change.¹ Try and make your classroom or learning environment a space where young people can voice their opinions and feelings on climate change a reality. We suggest using emoji or scenario cards to help students communicate these.

4. Get outside!

- One of the most important ways in which we support action for climate change, is helping students to develop a love, appreciation and wonder for the natural world.
- Research indicates that "one result of the reduction of children's direct experiences with the natural world is the rise of what researchers refer to as *biophobia* or *ecophobia*, a fear of the natural world and environmental issues."²
- Professor Dave Sobel writes this better than anyone when he says, "If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it."³
- A cross-cultural research study by J.A. Palmer (1993) found that the single most important factor in developing personal concern for the environment was positive experiences in the outdoors during childhood.⁴
- So try and take your learning outside, encourage children and students to use their creativity and to play, to take enjoyment in nature and to simply be outdoors.
- Encourage students to spend five seconds on their walk/drive/cycle home from school to notice a tree, a cloud or bird in the sky. The simple act of slowing down and taking the time to appreciate the nature that is around them, will help students to create an affinity with it.

References & resources for further reading:

- DeMocker, M. (2018) *The Parents' Guide to Climate Revolution: 100 Ways to Build a Fossil-Free Future, Raise Empowered Kids, and Still Get a Good Night's Sleep.*
- Hall, D. & Dowdell, E. (2018) *Youth and Climate Change: International Youth Participation in the IPCC Cities and Climate Change Conference* (D. Davdison & C. Karsgaard, Eds). Edmonton, Canada
- Palmer, J. (1993) *Development of concern for the environment and formative experiences of educators.* Journal of Environmental Education 24: 26-30
- Sheldrake, R., Amos, R. & Reiss, M. (2019) *Children & Nature: A research evaluation for The Wildlife Trusts.* UCL Institute of Education, London
- Sobel, D. (1996) *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart of Nature Education.* Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society
- (2005) *Helping Children Learn to Love the Earth Before We Ask Them to Save It: Developmentally Appropriate Environmental Education for Young Children.* Dimensions Educational Research Foundation.

¹ Hall, D. & Dowdell, E. (2018) *Youth and Climate Change: International Youth Participation in the IPCC Cities and Climate Change Conference* (D. Davdison & C. Karsgaard, Eds). Edmonton, Canada

² (2005) *Helping Children Learn to Love the Earth Before We Ask Them to Save It: Developmentally Appropriate Environmental Education for Young Children.* Dimensions Educational Research Foundation

³ Sobel, D. (1996) *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart of Nature Education.* Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society

⁴ Palmer, J. (1993) *Development of concern for the environment and formative experiences of educators.* Journal of Environmental Education 24: 26-30