

HOW TO TALK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

A short guide developed by Educational Psychologists in the Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea Educational Psychology Consultation Service, Climate Change Working Group.

Further reading on relevant psychological issues is available in the document: 'Supporting children and young people: Extended guide for parents/carers' – contact louise.edgington@rbkc.gov.uk

"We need to prepare our children for what is coming, and we need to do it thoughtfully, wisely, kindly and playfully. That's our job." C. Hickman, Climate Psychology Alliance.

Here are some things to consider when speaking with children and young people about climate change:

1. Self-first.

- ➔ Before we can help others, we need to help ourselves. Take time to understand and process your own feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness, grief, guilt, and fear recognising that they are reasonable reactions to a problem the size of climate change. Prioritise self-care so you can be present to hold a child's anxieties.
- ➔ Gather the information you need via reliable sources, such as UN and MIT summaries (for adults) and BBC, NASA, National Geographic (for kids)



2. Prepare the conversation

- ➔ Considering the timings, context and content of conversations with children and young people can promote effective conversations about climate change.
 - Find a time that you are distraction free and emotionally ready to chat and in a more positive and hopeful mindset yourself.
 - Children might ask you a question when you're in the middle of something. During these times, it is important that you acknowledge them and explain you need to finish what you're doing then make time for the conversation later (e.g. *"that's a great question/idea! Can I have a think and come back to you?"*).
- ➔ You might want to build a conversation around something that's on the news or raised in their school or media feeds. If possible, try to get your own facts straight first.

3. In conversation

- ➔ Ask children questions to understand what they already know. Check for myths and rumours and if necessary, go on a fact-finding exercise together.
- ➔ Have conversations about nature and care for the environment. Find out more about environmental sustainability and explain that this is needed for future economic growth.
- ➔ When giving difficult facts or news, try to balance it with 3 pieces of positive news or action to retain a hopeful perspective. Just google 'positive climate news'.
- ➔ Focus on what we can do to help whenever a 'problem' is discussed. Build hope with examples of how past group efforts have made a difference (e.g. the ozone layer).

- ➔ Let them know their emotions are real and valid e.g. *“it’s ok to feel worried, I believe you are strong enough to make helpful changes”*.

4. Context of conversations: topics, stories and projects

The best conversations often take place in the context of an activity. Each child is different, so trust your judgement on what they can engage with. Here are some suggestions to start:

Pre-school and Reception age children:

- ➔ Focus on daily activities (e.g. walk instead of the car, look at the exhaust and talk about ‘dirty air’).
- ➔ Use of animals in stories (e.g. polar bears)

Primary age children:

- ➔ Stories and case studies.
- ➔ Learning about young activists around the world
- ➔ Project learning to affect change at home and in the community (e.g. a litter pick)

Secondary age children:

- ➔ Project learning to affect change in school and beyond. (e.g. setting up a petition to improve the school’s energy efficiency measures)
- ➔ Support and facilitates means of protesting
- ➔ Debate and critical reasoning –give children a voice and get them to think for themselves. Consider both sides of an argument.



Children with Special Educational Needs

- ➔ Children with learning difficulties may respond well to thinking about sustainable behaviours relevant to their everyday environment (e.g. recycling)

Children who have a strong desire for sameness and routine, including those with Autism, are likely to find the uncertainty of the climate situation very challenging. However, Autistic individuals tend to perceive the world ‘just as it is’ and are less susceptible to thinking shortcuts that can lead to denial or inaction (e.g. thinking *“this doesn’t affect me”, “someone else will sort it”*). This ‘clarity’, coupled with commonly strong technological skills may mean that autistic people have a significant amount to offer in developing a more sustainable future.

- ➔ Celebrate thinking differences in autism. Autistic thinking has an important role in the future of sustainability.

5. Further Learning opportunities to build resilience for the future

- ➔ Teach children how to spot fake news and check for accuracy.
- ➔ Engage CYP in ‘friendly’ debate to developing the skill of trying to form a balanced opinion, having considered both sides of an argument.
- ➔ Development of well-being, self-care and emotional resilience in the face of uncertainty. Children can be taught skills to understand, express and manage their emotions.
- ➔ Value and celebrate care, empathy and compassion as you would with academic achievement. People need to work together to address the challenge of climate change.

