

# Here's How to Talk to Kids About Climate Change in an Era of Climate Crisis

Teaching children how to be resilient and solve big-picture problems will prepare them for the future.

BY [BRIDGET SHIRVELL](#) Jan 10, 2020



As the mother of a 1-year-old, there are days I read the latest climate report and want to sit on the floor and sob — but that wouldn't be particularly useful or practical with an active toddler. More than anything, I want my daughter to grow into a happy, kind, successful person, and in order for her to do that on a planet that is getting hotter, she'll need skills that will make her as resilient to the climate crisis as possible.

Maybe climate crisis hasn't affected you yet. You might be lucky to live far from the wildfires that now routinely force Californians to flee their homes or far from the coasts with their rising sea levels. But even if the changing world hasn't impacted you yet, it will affect your child, and it helps to start building their problem-solving skills now. Wondering where to start? Read some tips for kicking off the conversation below.

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## Talk to your kids about the climate crisis, because chances are they're hearing about it.

Our kids are going to have to navigate the changes that climate crisis brings their entire lives. There are already days when poor air quality and high temperatures force people inside or severe hurricanes, forest fires, heatwaves, and worse dominate TV broadcasts. Between what kids are already seeing with their own eyes, hearing on the news, and gleaning second-hand from fictionalized depictions in movies and what they hear from other children, chances are yours are already thinking about the climate crisis. **But while kids need you to talk about it with them, you don't want them to live in a constant state of anxiety.**

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So, how do you broach the topic? You don't need to have a formal, sit-down conversation: It's easier to ask them if they have any questions and answer queries as they come up, focusing

on the steps they can take. **“It’s so important when you’re talking with kids about climate change to also talk about what they can do about it,** so it’s not framed as we’re all going to die,” says journalist Sara Peach, who fields questions about climate change on [Yale Climate Connections Ask Sara](#). “If you tell them a lot of people are working on it and kids can be part of the solution, kids will come up with ideas.” Peach recommends [NASA’s Climate Kids website](#) as a good resource to parents trying to understand climate change in order to answer their kids’ questions.

## **Developing social skills is the best way to help them adapt to the future.**

While thinking of how to prepare kids for the climate crisis, I wonder — should they learn how to sew their own clothes, to keep "fast fashion" out of landfills? Should I teach my daughter grow her own produce, so she could live self-sufficiently if she needed to?

There's certainly no harm in teaching sewing or gardening to a kid who is interested, but it turns out **there's another skill that's way more important than the others: living in a community.** “Because there’s such a long list of potential skills and no one person can know all of them, I’d focus more on teaching kids social skills,” Peach says. “Humans are social creatures. We live in families within communities, so even if they don’t have every practical skill, if they get along with others they’ll be able to work with others.”

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Maybe my daughter won’t be able to can her own produce, but if she knows how to look up from her smartphone and engage in a conversation (even with someone who doesn’t always share her viewpoints) she’ll be able to learn from someone who knows how to do it, should the need arise. Or — more likely — she’ll understand how to convince her neighbors to switch to clean energy so it won’t get to that point. Solving the climate crisis will require our kids to create more collectively minded communities than the ones we currently have.

## **Teach kids to cultivate their curiosities and flex their problem-solving skills.**

Mom and entrepreneur [Merel Kriegsman](#) tries inspire her two daughters to become deep thinkers and ask questions that help them live in a climate-changed world. Her family



watches age-appropriate documentaries to inspire her kids' curiosity and appreciation for the Earth, and also treats daily activities such as grocery shopping as a way to inspire them to think critically and ask ethical questions.

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**“We’re constantly helping them to ask important questions,** such as, ‘Where does this come from?’” Kriegsman said. “When Ava, my oldest, asks for something such as a new toy, I’ll ask, ‘Do you think you might have a friend that has that and has outgrown it? Can we find it in secondhand stores?’ I don’t want them to feel guilty for having desires, but I want them to think about the most ethical way to get what they want.” As they get older, kids who have practiced these critical-thinking skills will be able to apply them to future problems — issues that probably haven't even come up for us yet.

## Practice delayed gratification.

We live in an instant-gratification era, and yet kids that develop ability to be patient will ultimately be able to create a healthier planet. On an individual level, missing out on a new toy, or skipping takeout when there’s a fridge full of food, helps reduce consumerism, household waste, and an individual's carbon footprint. On a collective level, solving the climate crisis requires delayed gratification — it’s cooperating now to mitigate the damage when it’ll be future generations that see the results, not us.

So, how to break the instant-gratification habit? **If you give your kids an allowance, you’re probably already doing it — they learn that things have value, and if they want something they might have to wait and save for it.** The same goes when you make them wait to play until after their homework is done, or wait to eat that cookie until after they have dinner.

# Let them learn resilience young, so they can use it on a bigger scale when they get older.

There is so much pressure these days to shield kids from every bit discomfort, whether it be a restaurant not having the food they want, losing a little league game, or dealing with a disappointment at school. But kids who are able to bounce back from a setback will be more likely to thrive in a changing climate.

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"As modern parents, we can't prepare our kids for what's to come, because we don't know," Kriegsman says. "And therefore **the biggest gift we can give the next generation is helping them build resilience and adaptability**, so they can handle and deal with anything that comes their way."

First up, tame your instinct to step in and be the "lawnmower parent" or "helicopter parent" who solves problems for your children. Instead, encourage them to be positive when something doesn't go their way, and let them come up with alternative things to do. For example, if rain unexpectedly blows in on a planned beach day, have them brainstorm an indoor activity to do instead. This will also help them flex their problem-solving muscles, which is useful at any age, but, as they get older, will help them solve big-picture problems like how to reduce a community's carbon emissions.

## Engage them socially and civically, starting where they spend most of their time.

Kids who understand how to ask deep questions, delay gratification, and work with others will be able to engage with their communities around them. Help your children connect the dots between the climate crisis and how they can make a difference by showing them how they can take action.

There are numerous ways kids around the country are already doing this, and a lot of them are happening in schools where kids are taking the lead on everything from clean energy to reducing food waste.

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“Schools are often the single largest energy consumer in their area, so if we can make a dent right where our kids can spend their waking hours five days a week, it will help kids understand they can make an impact in a hands-on way while also giving them a lesson in STEM,” says Lisa Hoyos, the Director of [Climate Parents](#), which helps kids and their [parents encourage schools to move towards clean energy](#). The organization provides toolkits that include information on how to overcome specific challenges (including strapped school finances), the benefits of clean energy, and how to work directly with parents and school officials looking to make the change. Spearheading a school-changing project will give your kids experience in leadership, and show them how they really can make a difference.

## **Resources For Raising Climate Resilient Children**

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- ▶ [NASA's Climate Kids](#)
  - ▶ [Climate Parents](#)
  - ▶ [Yale Climate Connections](#)
  - ▶ [iMatter Youth](#)
  - ▶ [Sunrise Movement](#)
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