

Engage, educate and empower: The 3 Es to discuss climate change with children

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The [Canadian wildfires](#) over the last few months serve as a stark reminder of the far-reaching consequences of climate change.

Children, especially those with asthma, face heightened [health risks](#) due

to wildfire smoke. In some regions, concerns about decreased air quality have led to [school closures and canceled extracurricular activities](#). Distressing videos of [smoke-filled cityscapes](#) have gone viral on social media.

As [climate change](#) intensifies, wildfires, along with floods, droughts and [extreme temperatures](#), will be increasingly common.

As researchers in climate law and psychology, we believe that it is critical for parents, caregivers and educators to consider discussing climate change with [children](#) and youth.

A harmful legacy for future generations

All [United Nations member states](#), along with the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) and more than 99% of [climate scientists](#), accept that human activities cause climate change.

As climate change intensifies, [future generations](#) will inherit a profoundly altered planet. They will inhabit a planet with [poorer air quality](#), [heightened risk of illnesses like Lyme disease](#), and a [myriad of other detrimental medical conditions](#).

Given its drastic effects, [climate change can prompt understandable feelings of anxiety about the future](#). A recent worldwide study found that [84% of 16- to 25-year-olds expressed at least moderate worries about climate change](#). In Canada, [more than 78% of young people have reported that climate change has impacted their mental health](#).

Children with such anxious feelings are [more likely to feel depressed, sad and less motivated in their lives](#).

Children and youth care about climate change

Since [younger generations](#) are likely to experience the more drastic effects of climate change, they also need to be part of the solution. Thankfully, [young people](#) have already emerged as trailblazers.

This is important because children concerned with the effects of climate change can [inspire pro-environmental behaviors in themselves](#) and [others](#).

Young activists, including Australia's [Anjali Sharma](#), Canada's [Sophia Mathur](#), Germany's [Luisa Neubauer](#), Sweden's [Greta Thunberg](#) and the United States' [Xiuhtezcatl Martinez](#), have led legal challenges [urging governments to accelerate climate response efforts](#).

These [legal challenges](#) show the [increasing concerns about the effects of climate change](#) on Generation Z and future generations.

We need to discuss climate change with children and youth

Given that children and youth suffer the consequences of climate change and are called to play a key role in mitigating its effects, it is important to engage in discussions about climate change with them, even when it's hard.

Parents and caregivers may have different reasons for not discussing climate change with their children. Some may find it difficult to explain technical climate science facts, particularly to young children. Others may intuitively want to shield their children from the worrying effects of climate change, thus avoiding the topic.

Despite these concerns, it is important to have open and honest discussions with children about climate change.

Climate change is having major consequences on our world, sparking conversations in classrooms and on [social media](#). It is important for parents to join these discussions to help instill values and create an [open space](#) for children to discuss their thoughts and feelings about climate change.

Sometimes, this may mean having honest conversations about the upcoming challenges. At other times, this may mean providing comfort and reassurance about the future.

The three Es

In thinking about how to discuss climate change with children and youth, remember the three Es: Engage, Educate and Empower. This can help parents and caregivers instill hope and resilience in the next generation.

1. Engage

You can engage your kids through conversation. UNICEF advises initiating [discussions about children's understanding of climate change and their feelings towards it](#). The recent wildfires provide an easy example of how climate change affects our daily lives.

These conversations open avenues for parents and caregivers to delve into their child's hopes and fears regarding our changing environment. They also provide space to [explore our values and moral obligations](#).

By actively participating in these conversations, [adults can gain valuable insights and broaden their own knowledge alongside their children](#).

The Australian Psychological Society provides a [guide on age-appropriate conversation topics](#).

For example, with young children, you can discuss the impact of small actions like reducing waste and respecting the environment. With school-going children, you can start exploring the basics of climate change. With preteens and teens, you can talk about climate action and how we should respond to climate change.

2. Educate

Often, climate change can be a topic of much [confusion](#) and [division](#). To avoid perpetuating these effects on future generations, it is important to rely on trustworthy sources.

The 2023 IPCC policymakers report offers an [accessible summary of the latest climate science](#). NASA also offers [child-friendly resources explaining the science of climate change](#). Climate Kids offers [games and quizzes for middle school children](#). Many books have also been released [on climate change catering to school-aged children, preteens and high school students](#).

Practical education, like walking in [green spaces](#), can provide an invaluable educational opportunity to reflect on how climate change has and will continue to change our surroundings.

To guide this reflection, the Prairie Climate Center offers an [atlas of climate effects across Canada](#) to help understand the direct effects of climate change on our surroundings.

3. Empower

The first step to empowering your kids for the future is to help them take on actions to help the environment. This can start right at home through actions like taking shorter showers, reducing food waste or conserving electricity. It can also be done by involving them in family decisions that use a climate-friendly lens to discuss topics like family vacation plans and gifts.

Young people can also build communities through local and global environmental organizations. Some organizations engage in local actions such as the [creation and maintenance of community gardens](#).

Parents and caregivers can encourage the next generation to pursue careers in the green economy sectors including [renewable energy](#), [forestry and urban planning](#).

The health and well-being of our children and our planet are contingent on climate action. It is the responsibility of the adults in children's lives to foster discussions that ensure this effort is possible.

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