

Title	How to talk to your children about climate change
Authors	Mintz-Woo, Kian;Capisani, Simona
Publication date	2021-11-01
Original Citation	Mintz-Woo, K. and Capisani, S. (2021) 'How to talk to your children about climate change', Irish Examiner, 1 November, pp. 4-5. Available at: https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40733805.html (Accessed: 7 November 2021)
Type of publication	Contribution to newspaper/magazine
Link to publisher's version	https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40733805.html
Rights	© 2021, Irish Examiner.
Download date	2025-03-25 11:36:59
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12159



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Irish Examiner: Making Children Climate Responsible

Version:

October 24, 2021 [Final]

URL:

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40733805.html>

Potential Header:

Create climate actions to connect with children

Potential Lede:

Opinion: children may have well-founded worries about climate change, but focusing on helpful actions and science-based messages can empower them

Byline:

By [Kian Mintz-Woo](#), [Department of Philosophy](#) and [Environmental Research Institute](#)

University College Cork

and

[Simona Capisani](#), [Princeton University High Meadows Environmental Institute](#) and [Princeton University Center for Human Values](#)

Author Information:

Kian Mintz-Woo

University College Cork

Kian Mintz-Woo is a lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and an affiliate of the Environmental Research Institute at University College Cork and a guest research scholar at the Equity and Justice Group in the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis. He works on moral philosophy, both theoretical and applied to climate change policy. You can find more on his [Google Scholar](#) page or his [PhilPeople](#) page.

Simona Capisani

Princeton University

Simona Capisani is a Climate Futures Initiative Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University in the High Meadows Environmental Institute and the University Center for Human Values. She works on political and moral philosophy with a special focus on climate justice, climate change-related displacement and migration. You can find more on her [website](#).

Text [1255 words + 170 words for the following resource section]:

Many children are aware that the climate is changing, and some of them understand that human actions are behind these changes. But how can we explain something so large—something many of us struggle to process ourselves?

We believe addressing climate change with children should involve three steps. First, creating shared values about the natural world. Second, understanding the basics of climate change and previous successful environmental activities. Finally, acting both individually and communally to make contributions to and engage with those addressing the problem.

One way to start is to make sure to communicate shared values: the natural world is important both to connect to and to protect. Here in Cork, it is easy to walk with children through the countryside, stop to appreciate both the majestic ocean and frolicking goats, but also to admire the less obvious beauty of spiderwebs or flowers. Explicitly appreciating the environment [has benefits](#) beyond making the natural world less abstract.

The second step is making the issue clear. Some parents might be concerned that they don't understand climate change themselves enough to answer questions. But scientists like Dr Katherine Hayhoe help break down these topics in [accessible videos](#), which can help answer questions for both parents and children. Dr Hayhoe also [reminds us](#) that talking about climate change helps signal to both ourselves and others that others care.

However, the basics are not difficult to explain. The key point is that carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other “greenhouse gases” reflect some of the energy that the earth radiates to space back down to earth. This prevents the earth from cooling as much as it used to when there were fewer greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. “Fewer” is a key word here: we need *some* greenhouse gases to keep the planet habitable. However, especially over the past few decades, humans have dug up and burned enormous amounts of [oil which have been buried for millennia](#). The new greenhouse gases released from burning this oil radically destabilise the energy balance of the planet and move it away from the globally temperate period that human civilisation has enjoyed over the past few thousand years. When explaining these concepts, some people like to use the [metaphor of a “blanket”](#) of greenhouse gases, keeping energy or heat from escaping.

Luckily, not *all* of this energy goes to heating our environment; some of it is absorbed by oceans and by forests. However, we know that their capacity to absorb this extra energy is finite and even with that extra absorption, we already see major climate impacts in our backyard, such as the [July flooding across Western Europe](#). It is helpful to tie climate change to [local effects](#), or to extreme events elsewhere in Europe.

Some are concerned that our efforts to reduce emissions are too small to make a difference or unimportant. While it is often the case that coordinating with others has a greater effect, that does not mean that individual contributions do not matter. For one thing, climate change responds to the levels of emissions: your emissions could make subtle differences keeping the effects from reaching some thresholds. For another thing, if you are pessimistic about what others will do, that makes your actions *more* important, not less. Harmful climate impacts are worse the more greenhouse gases in the system, so if others contribute more, your emissions can be expected to do greater harm than if they did not.

As well as understanding the basics of climate, learning about the possible pathways and solutions can help parents acknowledge legitimate worries their children may have while avoiding anxiety and hopelessness. For parents of young adults, they can explore examine humanity's capacity to achieve a stable climate and learn about how ambitious climate goals can still make a difference.

For parents of younger children, they can discuss solutions that reflect collective action, such as the [story of repairing the hole in the ozone](#) which can serve as a model of international cooperation. In 1987, countries met in Montreal to sign a treaty that protected the ozone layer, whose weakening had just been discovered as a potential environmental threat. Due to coordination between countries, some potential alternatives, and forward-thinking political leaders, this treaty has been a huge success and now includes every country on Earth.

They can also discuss successful [conservation efforts](#) involved in protecting species, such as the California Condor, where a captive breeding programme restarted a population that had dwindled to only 27 individuals in 1987.

However, these stories of success should be measured against the real challenges of climate change. As Dr. Elizabeth Hasse [reminds us](#), strong emotions of worry, fear, or anger and the interplay of these emotions can be a mentally healthy response to climate change. Such emotions are appropriate reactions to the current and potential future loss of things both children and adults care about. Downplaying worries or repeating overly optimistic sentiments reassuring children that everything is fine and that they should remain positive can amount to emotional invalidation, which may make it more difficult for children to accept [negative emotions](#), live with the complexity of emotion, and [manage difficult situations](#).

Learning is just the start. Having shared these values and explained some of the facts, it is important to make sure that children both understand that many people are responsible, but we can also [be response-able](#), meaning that we are agents able to take actions that can

contribute, both as individuals and in communities, to addressing it. The goal of these actions is not to stop the problem, but to develop green virtues, attitudes and ways of thinking, as well as a healthy positive attitude. As [Dr Myisha Cherry points out](#), when we are unhappy about climate change, “anger not only demands that things change; it proclaims that change matters.”

How can we be response-able? Parents can start with simple household activities. For instance, families can discuss [food composting](#), which helps address food waste by making it into healthy soil. They can consider cutting back on meat (e.g. “[Meat-free Mondays](#)”, as advocated by Tom Hanks and Ringo Starr), especially ruminants like cattle and beef, since such changes in diet can [reduce individual emissions significantly](#). Not only is it healthier to eat more plant-based meals, it is also better for the environment—and it can be cheaper as well.

These ideas can also be at the level of the neighbourhood, with tree-planting or rubbish pick-up. For instance, the [National Spring Clean](#), usually in April, is a coordinated effort to clean up the country. Many towns have a [Tidy Towns](#) campaign and seaside communities can get involved in [Coastwatch](#).

Furthermore, parents can suggest ways to connect to others interested in addressing climate change. This can involve schools, community programs, or even climate actions. Some climate actions involve youth-led movements, such as [Fridays for Future](#), started by the influential Greta Thunberg. Her example helps to demonstrate the possibility that young people can be a force for change, and we have included a video of her speaking in our additional resources.

The key is that habits are formed early, and if children or young people have sense of connection to the environment, and ways that they can contribute to sustaining it, that can help combat anxiety or powerlessness. Adults can help support children through activities, whether individually or in communities. If our grandchildren look back and ask what we did, raising a generation that understands the challenge—and has the confidence to do something about it—has to be part of the answer.

More resources:

For Kids:

Climate Jargon Buster, which explains climate change context in everyday language:
<https://climatejargonbuster.ie/>

New York Times, an illustrated and interactive introduction to climate change for children:
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/18/climate/climate-change-future-kids.html>

The *Philosophy Club*'s Facebook page, for young people interested in climate change and philosophy: <http://www.facebook.com/ThePhilosophyClubAustralia>

Teen Vogue: 9 Climate Activists of Color You Should Know
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/youth-climate-activists-of-color>

For Adults:

Katherine Hayhoe's TED talk, about why we should all talk with others about climate change:
https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fix_our_climate_change_talk_about_it

The World Weather Attribution project looks at recent extreme weather events and tries to determine whether climate change made a difference to the likelihood of their occurring:
<https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/>

Outrage & Optimism Podcast (Christina Figueres & Tom Rivett-Carnac): Episode 119 "Dealing with Climate Grief With Luisa Neubauer"
<http://www.outrageandoptimism.org/episodes/dealing-with-climate-grief-luisa-neubauer?hsLang=en>

For both Kids and Adults:

Greta Thunberg's TED talk: An inspiring young woman talking about why climate change is important <https://youtu.be/EAmUjEsN9A>

The Guardian's "How to Talk to Kids About Climate Change", interviewing children in climate-threatened Tuvalu: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/audio/2019/oct/28/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-the-climate-crisis>

Luisa Neubauer's TED talk:
https://www.ted.com/talks/luisa_neubauer_why_you_should_be_a_climate_activist

Leah Namugerwa, Ugandan youth activist (interview) https://youtu.be/8tSu5RyV8_0