



Talking to Kids about Climate Change

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One day after school, my oldest daughter foraged for a snack in the refrigerator, chattering away about her classes. In chemistry, they had discussed global warming—not a new subject for Kate, considering she lives with a mom who recycles used aluminum foil.

I've wondered about passing along my values of environmental stewardship to my kids, but I want to do it constructively. Some of the media coverage I've seen on the climate change threat reminds me of growing up as a Cold War kid, when grownups wrung their hands about mushroom clouds and we children scratched our heads, wondering what the fuss was all about.

Seeking advice, I spoke to someone who teaches kids to love the earth God made. Sister Sue Rogers directs Earthworks, an environmental learning center in Plymouth, Indiana, that is a ministry of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Catholic community. She conducts summer day camps that give elementary-school children a chance to tromp through the woods, swim in a lake, and make soap, cheese, and bread. Through hands-on projects and role-playing, Rogers and her volunteers help kids find solutions for environmental problems. She could educate people about environmental issues in many ways, but for Rogers, starting with children is strategic. "That's how change happens," she says. "You teach children, they teach their parents, and it becomes a way of life in families."

Though I had envisioned sitting my girls down for the Big Climate Talk

(sort of like the birds and the bees, only without the blushing and stammering), Rogers suggests better ways to broach the subject. Young children don't deal in abstract concepts, she says, so start at home with practical changes, changes that kids can see and experience.

One practical change is recycling. Rogers says even young children can look for the recycling symbol on the bottom of plastic containers and learn to put them in the recycle bin instead of the trash. Some of her campers take charge of recycling at their houses and even nag their parents about it. Another practical change is switching out incandescent light bulbs with fluorescent ones. Kids could go on a scavenger hunt through the house and see how many bulbs could be changed (adults should handle the bulbs, of course).

For Further Information

Here are some helpful resources for parents who want to know more.

The National Wildlife Federation's website has a fun "family action checklist" that can help identify some practical changes to make around the house (www.climateclassroom.org, www.climateclassroomkids.org/popup_familyactionplan.html).

At www.scholastic.com, an article by writer Amanda Wheat gives more specific age-group guidance on how to communicate with kids about climate change, as well as a list of kid-friendly resources.

The EPA's website uses animation and games to educate kids about the science of climate change (www.epa.gov/climatechange/kids/change.html). ■

When you implement new household environmental habits, let the changes provoke questions in your children, Rogers says. Talk about them in everyday conversation at home, in the car, at the supermarket—whenever it comes up. "It's entirely appropriate for parents to create those teachable moments," says Rogers. Above all, she advises, don't lecture. "Putting them on the spot puts them in school mode, and it goes in one ear and out the other," she says.

Kids enjoy finding green solutions, Rogers says, and solutions are empowering. One lesson she demonstrates at camp highlights wasteful packaging. She and the kids count the juice boxes in everyone's lunch at the beginning of the week, do some simple multiplication, and then imagine a big pile of boxes by the end of the summer. The kids figure out quickly that they can make a big container of juice and put some in a plastic reusable bottle to bring every day.

Make changes, provoke questions, demonstrate stewardship, but don't try to do everything at once, Rogers suggests. Because of media reports, people are aware of environmental problems worldwide, and this can be overwhelming. "We can't pay attention to every problem," Rogers says. "You choose what interests you and go from there."

That's advice this parent was happy to take. I've always believed that going green is a journey. It's good to know it's a journey my family can take together. ■

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