

Talking about the climate with adolescents



TOOL:

Prevention | Intervention

TARGET AUDIENCE:

College / High school

PERSONS TARGETED:

Speakers | Parents | Teenagers

CONCEPTION:

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TALKING ABOUT CLIMATE WITH ADOLESCENTS

TOOL: Prevention | Intervention

PEOPLE TARGETED BY THE TOOL: Speakers | Parents | Teenagers

– DETAILS: Parents, Teachers, psychoeducators, special educators, psychologists, school counselors.

TARGET AUDIENCE: College / High school

– Adolescents , in order to ensure the development of environmental awareness, to encourage the healthy management of climate emotions, and to support citizen agency within the context of the climate crisis.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS

- Learn the issues related to climate change (environmental awareness, sustainable lifestyle).
- Accept the emotions linked to the climate crisis (sadness, fear, anger, guilt, etc.).
- Welcome and regulate your emotions.
- Act for the climate: do your part and feel useful.
- Discover the strength of the collective.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

– Help parents, teachers and other adults, address the subject of climate change with adolescents while having concrete tools to allow adolescents to express their feelings, welcome climate-related emotions, and transform their eco-anxiety into eco-action . Climate action has been shown to have a positive impact not only on the environment but also on well-being and mental health.

CONCEPTION

- **Dr. Laelia Benoit** (Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Researcher) – Yale University
- **Amber Acquaye** (Medical Student) – Yale School of Medicine – English Translation

TOOL CONTENT:

TALKING ABOUT CLIMATE WITH ADOLESCENTS



More and more children, adolescents and young adults around the world are concerned about climate change¹⁻³. Adolescent mental health professionals agree that ecological grief (feelings of anger, guilt, fear, shame, anxiety, and hopelessness), also called “eco-anxiety,” is a natural response to legitimate ecological loss⁴. Rather than seeing these emotions as difficulties that adolescents should avoid, we can see them as healthy emotional reactions, an empathetic response towards the planet⁵.

However, managing these strong feelings, “eco-emotions”, is a significant challenge. If the feeling of not being able to act for the climate increases eco-anxiety, it has been shown that collective climate actions help reduce eco-anxiety, and that they would therefore be a protective factor for mental health in period of climate crisis⁶. This toolbox helps you approach the subject of climate change with adolescents through welcoming their emotions, ideas and helping them engage in environmental actions that are as effective for the climate as they are for well-being.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE ECO-EMOTIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

Teenagers worried and disappointed by their governments' inaction

Most adolescents consider climate change to be a very serious problem (61%-68%)^{7,8} that will harm their generation (70% to 82%) and agree that human activities are at risk. origin (86%). Many American teens feel fear (57%), anger (52%), or guilt (42%)⁹. Ethnic minorities such as African American and Hispanic peoples, express a greater sense of urgency⁸. In Australia, 80% of adolescents say they are worried about the climate crisis. Among them, more than 46% feel worried at least once a week. More than 17% are losing sleep worrying about climate change and more than 20% are considering having fewer children or no children at all.⁷ In a study conducted among 10,000 young people aged 15 to 25 in 10 countries, most participants negatively evaluated their government's response to climate change and reported more feelings of betrayal than comfort. Correlations indicate that climate anxiety and distress are significantly related to perceptions of inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal¹.

Yet few teenagers are taking climate action

Although the majority are worried about climate change, fewer adolescents are taking action. While 77% of Australian teenagers do not think young people's concerns about climate change are adequately addressed⁷, less than 50% have taken action to reduce their own carbon footprint. Most rarely or never discuss the climate with their family (54%) or friends (61%)⁸, and only 14% believe they learned "a lot" at school about climate change.



2. HELP WELCOME ECO-EMOTIONS

It all starts by helping the teenager learn how to accept the emotions aroused by awareness of the climate crisis. To do this, the adult must already know how to accept their own emotions and agree to start a sincere discussion with the adolescent.

Understanding our own eco-emotions

Intense fear of climate change, especially associated with guilt over our own inaction, can cause emotional paralysis⁹. Adults may tend to automatically protect themselves through distractions or avoiding the subject. These defense mechanisms do not help us face the climate crisis or get well. Avoiding broaching the subject with adolescents is a mistake:

- Today, teenagers already understand climate change, through school, their friends, or online (social networks, sites).
- Even when adolescents are concerned about the climate crisis, more than 54% of them do not broach the subject of climate, either with their parents or with their friends. The reasons for this silence are multiple^{2,3}:
 - With their friends, the teenagers fear that the climate will be too heavy a subject for the atmosphere of the group. They also fear that their attitude will be perceived as judgemental.
 - When their parents do not talk about a subject (e.g. climate, sexuality), adolescents interpret this silence as a taboo, or as disinterest. They therefore avoid this subject with their parents.

Take the initiative in the conversation

Since adolescents rarely address the issue of climate change, even when they are informed or worried, it is up to adults to take the first step. Take some quiet time to bring up this conversation. You can talk about your experience of global warming, a current event, or your feelings. In this way, you show that we can always welcome our emotions even when they are uncomfortable.



3. BE A MODEL: SINCERITY AND BEGINNERS' SPIRIT

Sincerity: answering the teenager's questions

Learning about a difficult reality can raise questions and anxieties. This is also how we grow. This acceptance phase can take time. It is important to welcome teenagers' questions about climate, even the most difficult ones, and answer them honestly. Should we still have children? Why did you take the plane? This is an opportunity to show adolescents that everyone can share their emotions, their uncertainties and their doubts, and question themselves. Take advantage of this conversation to question your preconceptions (eg: what is a family?), share your hopes and your commitments. Adolescents are very grateful to adults who take the time to think about existential questions with them without having ready answers or imposing certainties on them.

Having a beginner's mind: questioning and commitment

Many teenagers feel that previous generations did nothing to combat the climate crisis^{2,3,10}. Establishing dialogue between adults (parents, grandparents, teachers) and adolescents allows us to share actions that their elders carried out (e.g.: refusing the use of disposable plastic bags, being a cyclist), or to sincerely recognize our past neglect. Adolescents appreciate when elders share know-how on sustainable living² (e.g. recycling, making homemade preserves, dressing warmer indoors in winter lowering heating costs, cooling their homes in summer without air conditioning). These exchanges allow you to convey your intentions and values. In return, being open to adopting climate actions proposed by adolescents (e.g.: increasing the proportion of vegetarian meals in your diet) and actively committing to adopting new habits, allows you to show that you can evolve at any age and that all generations can come together to fight the climate crisis.



Drawing inspiration from other cultures to modify your own

International studies show that in each country, local culture favors certain climate actions and hinders others. Adolescents may be discouraged by negative remarks when they adopt a climate action rare in their country (e.g. not depending of the car in the United States; having a vegetarian diet in France; cutting out beef in Brazil)^{2,3}. Adults can show adolescents that they can be proud of the climate actions that work in their country while drawing inspiration from what is being done elsewhere, and thus change cultural norms in their country.

4. SUPPORTING AGENCY BY CO-CONSTRUCTING IMPACTFUL ACTIONS

The need for agency: wanting to be effective

Many adolescents keep themselves well informed and know that individual climate action (eco-gestures) is currently insufficient to change the global climate trajectory. They are not satisfied with actions that they know have no impact. So don't expect to allay their concerns by creating a work of art from a plastic bottle! The discussion you begin must take into account the difficult realities that work against the good intentions of individuals (e.g.: government inaction, disinterest of citizens, pressure from lobbies towards overconsumption, and geopolitical issues). Recognizing adolescents' need for agency is a first step in thinking with them about realistic and impactful climate actions.

Co-build impactful actions

Adolescents not only want to take the initiative to carry out climate actions (e.g.: choose the idea, propose a project that is close to their heart), but they also want to ensure that their action will have a significant impact on reducing climate change. their carbon footprint 2 . The role of adults can be to:

- Remember the usefulness of eco-gestures : even if it is true that eco-gestures are not enough on their own, they help reduce up to 30% of our carbon impact. In a context where every degree of temperature counts, it would be a shame to disregard them. Reducing packaging, recycling, composting, reducing the carbon impact of your diet (e.g. eating less meat), favoring transport with a low carbon impact (e.g. cycling, public transport),bartering or favoring second-hand purchases or barter...all valuable eco-gestures to include in our daily lives.
- Suggest local collective actions : due to their scale, local collective actions have a better carbon impact than eco-gestures alone. Indeed, collective actions have an impact on the carbon emissions of many people. For example: commit within the municipality to create cycle paths separated from cars; modify cafeteria menus to increase the proportion of plant-based foods; in rural areas, organize a carpooling or collective transport system; organize an annual collection and sale of second-hand clothes within the school; inform your neighbors about solutions to reduce the energy consumption of homes (insulation, solar panels, heat pump).
- Brainstorm : to support adolescents' initiatives while directing them towards the most impactful actions.



5. DISCOVER THE STRENGTH OF THE COLLECTIVE

Collective actions have a greater impact on reducing carbon emissions, but also help reduce eco-anxiety⁶. However, adolescents can face difficulties when undertaking large-scale projects alone (e.g. helping to modify urban planning policy, undertaking energy renovations in a collective building). Here are three ways adults can support them:

Protecting our “common” good

Discuss with adolescents what is common to us, what we all need, what we should share, and what everyone should take care of. Ex: air, water, trees, green spaces. During adolescence, the examples become more abstract. Ex: living together, intergenerational knowledge, mutual aid, etc.

Be curious and learn together

Many adults are reluctant to engage in climate explanations for fear of not being able to explain the mechanism accurately. Indeed, adults do not know everything, in particular, they do not have all the answers to climate change. If the teen asks you technical questions that you don't know the answer to, say you don't know, and look up the answer together with the teen, online. This is the opportunity to show that there is no shame in not knowing, and that we can always find out when we are not sure of our knowledge. Here are some examples to look for online: “How does recycling work? », “How much would we reduce the carbon impact of our home if we improved insulation? », “What is the carbon impact of an electric car? “.

Lead large-scale projects as a team

In class or as a family, choose with the teenager what the next challenge will be to reduce the carbon impact of the home or community. If the idea was proposed by the teenager, it's even better. Remember to reward them for their spirit of initiative. Carrying out climate actions through collective projects allows adolescents to acquire the skills necessary for teamwork: to research questions, negotiate, choose a strategy, plan it, follow the established plan, distribute tasks, take responsibility for the mission entrusted to us, to know how to help and accept help from others; and finally to share the fruits of a successful project with their team. During adolescence, it becomes possible to engage in large-scale projects (e.g. reducing the energy consumption of a collective building). But these projects can be so complex that if teenagers are left to complete them alone, the many obstacles may discourage them. The role of adults is to get involved alongside them, help them move forward and request external help for complex tasks (e.g. technical expertise, request for authorization, quotes for expenses, fundraising, etc.). Do not hesitate to call on your social group, benefit from mutual assistance on social networks, or seek public aid. Teenagers learn to work as a team to take on major team challenges.

Celebrate successes

Adolescents may feel a lack of recognition for their ecological initiatives (at school, with family, or in their community). Remember to celebrate successes, big and small, as soon as a project is completed.

- Understanding our eco-emotions
- Take the initiative in the conversation

- Answer questions truthfully
- Beginner's mind: questioning, transmission and commitment
- Take inspiration from other cultures



- Protect our common good
- Be curious and learn together
- Lead large-scale projects as a team
- Celebrate successes

- Agency: understanding the need to be effective
- Co-construct impactful actions

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TEACHING RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

EcoNova, Canada: <https://econova.ca/>

The Office for Climate Education: <https://www.oce.global/fr>

Zamizen, learning emotions at school: <https://zamizen.fr/>

Ma Petite Planète, environmental and ecological challenge: <https://mapetiteplanete.org/>

Les Petits Citoyens: <https://lespetitscitoyens.com/>

Greenpeace, educational resources:
<https://www.greenpeace.fr/ressources-pedagogiques-environnement/>

La Main à la Pâte Foundation, for teaching science in the classroom:
<https://fondation-lamap.org/projet/le-climat-ma-planete-et-moi>

Desjardins Foundation and Jasmin Roy Sophie Desmarais Foundation: The emojeu
<https://fondationjasminroy.com/initiative/lemojeu/>

Agency for the Teaching of French Abroad (AEFE) :
<https://www.aefe.fr/vie-du-reseau/toute-lactualite-theme/developpement-durable?page=1>

Ministry of National Education (France) : <https://eduscol.education.fr/1132/changement-climatique>