

# Talking about the climate with children



**TOOL:**

Prevention | Intervention

**TARGET AUDIENCE:**

Preschool | Primary / Elementary

**PERSONS TARGETED:**

Speakers | Parents | Children

**CONCEPTION:**

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FOUNDATION

# TALKING ABOUT THE CLIMATE WITH CHILDREN

**TOOL:** Prevention | Intervention

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**PEOPLE TARGETED BY THE TOOL:** Stakeholders | Parents | Children

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

**TARGET AUDIENCE:** Preschool | Primary / Elementary

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– Preschool and primary school children, to ensure flourishing emotional development in light of the climate crisis.

## EMOTIONAL NEEDS

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- 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

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- Help parents and teachers to broach the subject of climate change with children, while having concrete ways to allow the child to express their feelings, to work through climate-related emotions and to transform possible anxiety into hopeful climate action.

## CONCEPTION

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- **Dr. Laelia Benoit** (Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Researcher) – Yale University

## TOOL CONTENT:

# TALKING ABOUT THE CLIMATE WITH CHILDREN



More and more children, adolescents and young adults from around the world are concerned about climate change<sup>1-3</sup>. However, some adults are hesitant to talk to children about climate change for fear of causing them distress. Other adults are so uncomfortable with the global situation that they ridicule children's climate concerns and actions, rather than welcoming their eco-emotions<sup>4</sup>.

Children's mental health professionals agree that ecological grief (feelings of anger, guilt, fear, shame, anxiety, and hopelessness) is a natural and legitimate response to ecological loss<sup>5</sup>.

Rather than considering these emotions as difficulties that children should avoid, we can see them as healthy human reactions, an empathetic response towards the planet<sup>6</sup>.

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 reduce eco-anxiety and that they would therefore be a protective factor for mental health in periods climate crisis<sup>7</sup>. This toolbox helps you approach the subject of climate with a child by welcoming their emotions and helping them engage in environmental actions that are as effective for the climate as they are beneficial for their well-being.

# 1. HELP WELCOME ECO-EMOTIONS

It all starts by helping the child accept the emotions aroused by awareness of the climate crisis. To do this, adults must already know how to accept their own emotions, understand children's strengths and vulnerabilities, start a discussion and agree to answer the child's questions.

## Understanding our own emotions

Intense fear of climate change, especially coupled with guilt over our own inaction, can cause emotional paralysis<sup>8</sup>. Adults may tend to automatically protect themselves by distracting themselves or avoiding the subject. These defense mechanisms do not help us face the climate crisis or get well. Avoiding broaching the subject with children is a mistake:

- They will sooner or later learn about the climate crisis at school, from their friends, or online.
- When parents avoid talking about a subject (e.g.: climate, sexuality), children interpret this discomfort as a taboo. They end up avoiding this subject with their parents.

## Know children's strengths and vulnerabilities

- **Children have deep empathy for the natural world**, especially animals. This empathy encourages us to care about nature and take care of it.
- **Children have more moral clarity than adults** : when they are faced with moral dilemmas (e.g.: reducing their comfort to save animals), they are more ready to make just decisions for the climate.
- **Children are altruistic**: if they can do something to help the planet, they do it with enthusiasm.
- **Children tend to overestimate the risks** to their health and that of their family, in the face of danger. If the child overestimates the risks ("are we all going to die because of climate change?"), it is important to welcome his or her fears, rephrase them and clarify the issues ("no, we don't "We're not going to die from climate change, but some things will change").



• **Children discover the existence of death.** Before the age of two, they are not aware of death, then between approximately 2 and 6 years of age, they imagine death as temporary or reversible. Around 5 or 6 years old, children understand that death is final. This awareness can coincide with major life events, such as the death of a loved one, or seemingly trivial ones, such as the sight of a dead wild animal. This awareness sparks a period of a few weeks to a few months when the child may ask questions about death, be afraid of dying or that their parents will die, or have nightmares about death. If the child learns about climate change during this time, he or she may seem excessively distressed about the climate. Adults should not feel guilty for talking about the climate: children are at an age where this awareness of death resonates with many subjects. He would have wondered about death, even without knowing about climate change.

## Take the initiative in the conversation

When the child is calm and available, talk to him about the climate in simple, age appropriate words. This conversation can be facilitated by reading a book.

## Answer the child's questions

Learning about a difficult reality can raise questions and anxieties. This is also how we grow. This acceptance phase can take a few weeks. It is important to welcome the child's questions, even the most difficult ones, and answer them honestly, using simple words appropriate to their age.



## 2. PROVIDE KEYS TO TAKE ACTION

### Propose solutions

Children want to help the planet. Suggest concrete actions that they can take, with your help, to live more sustainably. These solutions can be:

- Eco-friendly actions: recycling, composting, reducing packaging, reducing the carbon impact of your menu over the week, favoring low-carbon impact transport (e.g. cycling, public transport), etc.
- Collective actions: collecting and selling second-hand clothes in their school or community, etc.
- Be a role model: setting an example in class or at home by adopting a sustainable lifestyle.

### Explain the reasons for your actions in words adapted to the age of the child

Today, many parents adopt a sustainable lifestyle, but do not always explain to their children the reasons for their choices (e.g.: recycling, composting, transportation). Research with children and adolescents has shown that commands such as “turn off the light”, “throw this packaging in the recycling bin” do not have much meaning for the child if they are not accompanied by explanations. For children to acquire and retain ecological lifestyle habits, it is not enough for them to observe adults, they must understand their intentions and values. Favor positive explanations when possible: “we compost so that the healthy, leftover peelings can feed the earthworms and then the plants”, rather than “if we don't compost, all the waste will be burned together and it's toxic “.



### Use storytelling materials

Use tools that allow you to tell a story such as children's books, films, or short, online videos. These stories feature characters who are committed to the planet. They allow children to use their imagination and creativity to discover environmental issues and prepare to act for the planet.

## 3. DISCOVER THE STRENGTH OF THE COLLECTIVE

We know today that acting effectively for the climate requires more than individual actions aimed at reducing our carbon impact (“eco-gestures”). If eco-gestures are essential, collective action not only makes it possible to carry out large-scale projects (e.g. town planning policy) which have a greater impact on the reduction of carbon emissions, but also to reduce eco-anxiety<sup>7</sup>. Preparing children for climate issues involves introducing them to the strength of the collective.

### Protect our “common” good

Discuss with the children what is common to us, what we all need, what we share, and what everyone should take care of. E.g.: air, water, trees, green spaces. As the child grows, the examples may become more abstract. E.g.: living together, intergenerational knowledge, mutual aid, etc.

### Be curious and search 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. This is an opportunity to teach the child that knowledge can be built together. You can look up information with the child online: “How does recycling work?”, “How much would we reduce the carbon impact of our home if we improved insulation? “. You can’t know everything. On the other hand, there are many online resources with simple diagrams and images that explain climate related science such as how electricity works or how and why we recycle waste while also highlighting the planet and its history.



### Take collective action

In class or as a family, choose with the child what the next challenge will be to reduce the carbon impact of the home or community. Carrying out climate actions through collective projects allows children to acquire different skills: how to research questions, negotiate, plan a strategy, follow the established plan, distribute tasks, take responsibility for the mission entrusted to us, know how to help others and accept help from others, and finally share the fruits of a successful project with your team. Here are some examples of collective projects that can be carried out with children under 10 years old (non-exhaustive list): organization of an annual sale of second-hand clothes within the school; modification of cafeteria menus to increase the proportion of plant-based food; in rural areas, organization of a carpooling or collective transport system; commitment within the municipality to create cycle paths separated from cars; etc.

## REFERENCES

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3. Chou T., D., Abelama, E., Thomas, I., Martin, A. & Benoit, L. Climate awareness, anxiety, and actions among youth: a qualitative study in a middle-income country. *Braz. J. Psychiatry* (submitted: revision 2).
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7. Schwartz, S. E. O. et al. Climate change anxiety and mental health: Environmental activism as buffer. *Curr. Psychol.* (2022) doi:10.1007/s12144-022-02735-6.
8. Stoknes, P. E. *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action*. (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015).

## 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>