

A photograph showing the back of a woman in a blue and white striped shirt. She is holding the hands of two children, a girl in a pink backpack and a boy in a blue denim jacket and black backpack, as they walk away from the camera on a path. A teal text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

## Supporting children in the climate crisis

Many parents and caregivers worry about how the climate crisis will affect their children's future. This information sheet will assist parents and caregivers communicate to their children about climate change and offer ideas about how they can assist their children to cope with any concerns they may have.

### Are my children ready to talk about climate change?

The best way to find out if your children are ready to talk about climate change is to listen carefully to what they say and the questions they ask. For example, they might report something they heard at school such as "We watched a video about the Great Barrier Reef dying" or ask questions about environmental issues such as recycling. You can use these questions as opportunities to open up conversations around climate change and discuss the ways you as a family can help.

When discussing climate change, it is important that you provide your children with honest information in language they can understand, for example "I don't use plastic shopping bags because the way they are made and thrown away is bad for the environment" or "I catch the train to work because cars use petrol and cause pollution". You will know from their responses whether they want to talk more about it.

You can also ask them directly if they have heard about climate change and, if so, how they feel about it.

### What do I say to my children about climate change?

How you discuss climate change with your children will depend on their age and ability to understand the concept of climate change.

Whatever their age, when discussing climate change always be sure to:

- point out that many people are working to stop the climate changing too much
- explain that there are things that everyone can do to help (e.g., recycling)
- point out that big problems have been solved in the past through many people working together
- discuss what you and your child can do to make a difference.

Parents and caregivers of young children can:

- explain the environmentally-friendly things you do as a family to help and care for the natural world (e.g., “We put food scraps in the compost bin so the worms can make the soil better for growing veggies and flowers”)
- share your own love of nature by going on family picnics, planting trees together, or growing a vegetable garden
- read books together that introduce the concept of climate change or discuss environmental problems (e.g., *The Magic School Bus and the Climate Challenge* by Joanna Cole or *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss )
- talk about climate change in everyday situations (e.g., “We’re not going to take our car today. Riding our bikes is better for the environment and good for our health as well” or “We have to save water because we haven’t had as much rain as usual this year because the climate is changing”).

Older children and teenagers will probably know quite a lot about climate change after learning about it at school, discussing it with their friends or hearing about it in the media. Some teenagers may welcome long conversations about climate change at the dinner table while others may feel cynical about finding solutions and want to avoid the topic. No matter your children’s preference, it is important to have open conversations about climate change with your children. Also, don’t be afraid to talk about the political side of climate change. Together you and your children might analyse different parties’ positions on climate change or research the science and facts of climate change.

## How do I respond to my children’s feelings about climate change?

Your children might feel worried or sad or helpless or even angry about climate change. It is also quite likely that children are confused about the facts and do not know if they are personally threatened.

It is helpful to talk with children about these concerns by:

- giving them opportunities to talk about things that worry them, explaining that talking about their concerns is better than internalising them

- asking them what they know about climate change, paying attention to their feelings as well as their knowledge
- helping them put their feelings into words and validating their concerns (e.g., “It makes sense that you feel worried when you think about climate change – I do too”)
- using personal stories to show how you have come to learn about climate change, why you think about it the way you do, and how you try to deal with the difficult feelings that come up
- practising a range of strategies to help them calm themselves down when they are upset, such as slow breathing, self-talk (i.e., saying things to themselves like “take it easy”), or muscle relaxation (i.e., tensing muscles like a robot then relaxing them like a rag doll)
- planning specific activities that your child can do to help take action against climate change
- Maintaining a hopeful outlook to help them cope with the reality of the climate crisis; psychologists call this meaning-focused coping, which refers to the importance of trying to create meaning and purpose out of a difficult situation like climate change.

## What climate actions can I do with my children?

There are many climate actions that parents can do with their children, or can support their children to do. These include:

- Listen to children’s ideas about how to protect the environment and help them to carry them out if needed. For example, they may want to get involved in planting trees, growing vegetables, recycling and reusing, or they may want to produce pro-environmental posters for public places or family-friendly climate rallies.
- Modelling positive environmental behaviours (e.g., recycling, using public transport) and explain why you are doing them.
- Develop self-efficacy in your children (i.e. their belief that they can make a difference) by teaching them how to set goals and work through the steps needed to achieve them. Always remember to celebrate your children’s successes (e.g., “You planted the seedlings, looked after them, now look at all the pumpkins you have grown. Well done!”).
- Look for examples where other children have come up with projects or actions to protect the environment.
- Provide clear expectations of what you want them to do to protect the environment and guide them towards action (e.g., “We don’t drive if we can ride a bike”).
- Remember that doing something (no matter how small) is better than doing nothing.