

## *Talking with children about climate change*

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**Byline:** By Dr. Steph Lee American Academy of Pediatrics

### **Body**

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Your children may have questions about the *changing climate*. Many are hearing about or experiencing *climate-change*-fueled disasters such as wildfires and severe storms. *Climate change* affects everyone, but it impacts kids the most. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental health harms because they are still growing and have higher exposure to air, food and water based on weight.

While the *climate* crisis can feel like an overwhelming topic, there are healthy ways to talk with kids about it. We can communicate in a way that is honest, hopeful, developmentally appropriate, and action oriented. By helping kids understand the issue of *climate change* and how it affects their health and futures, we empower them to make a difference. For toddlers and children under 5, it's a perfect time to introduce them the joys of nature. Parents may take walks to show how weather affects nature. Talk about how weather makes the seasons. You can point out bird nests, for example, and talk about how weather influences when and where birds make their nests. Talk about other wild animals and discuss how they all have homes that need protecting. Young children also enjoy gardening. Pick out fruit, vegetable or flower seeds to plant in your garden, or herbs to plant in kitchen boxes. Young children can help take care of plants, and get excited seeing something grow from nothing. Talk about how your child needs air to breathe and so do plants and animals. When pollutants get in the air, that affects their health. Point out local effects of *climate change* depending on your location. Some areas may be more prone to wildfires, hurricanes and floods, while others may experience longer and more intense heat waves or an increase in illness from mosquitoes and ticks. As children grow older, parents may begin explaining concepts behind *climate change* in simple scientific terms. Ask children what they know and fill in blanks or research it together. NASA has online resources to help parents go through each aspect of *climate change*. Families may also discuss how personal choices can affect the environment and show respect for nature. Calculate your family's carbon footprint together and ask them how they suggest lowering it. Examples might include turning lights off after leaving the room, biking or walking or taking public transit or carpooling when possible. Families may choose to eat a more plant-based diet. Explain how people — including kids — can be powerful forces in protecting the environment. Point out that choices we make can help make our planet, and people, healthier. Because teens are more aware of how issues may influence all aspects of their lives, you can discuss how *climate change* affects our economy and society. This can spark scientific curiosity and introduce the idea of civic responsibility. Pick a recent or ongoing event and discuss how *climate change* might have contributed to the event and its economic effects. For example, families can talk with their teen about how *climate change* is causing longer and more severe wildfires in California, resulting in the loss of homes and businesses. Discuss how it is also causing air pollution that forces people indoors. Consider the mental health effects all of this can have on families. Families might also explore how *climate change* doesn't affect everyone equally, and the ways some communities experience more health risks. Discuss how everyone should have an equal opportunity to clean air and water. Encourage your teen to come up with solutions and creative ways to express their ideas. They might use a science class presentation or a school, Scouts, 4-H or other project to educate peers about the need for *climate change* solutions. They could also form a club at school and

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brainstorm how to help the local community, write for a local or state newspaper on why teens care about the **climate** or join a national youth advocacy organization. Work together to make **changes** at home, incorporating your teen's ideas. Participate in advocacy as a family and pace your discussions to help prevent stress and anxiety. When disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes happen, be sure to limit your child's media use to cut down on the amount of distressing footage they see and hear on the news. Take nature breaks when possible. When you talk with your child, stay hopeful and focused on solutions. We have tools to take **climate** action right now, remind them, and these can have immediate benefits for our health. Even if the **climate** crisis is accelerating, emphasize that together we can clean up our air and water and reduce our carbon footprint. Parents are role models and can think about ways to advocate for a healthier environment for children. They can ask the school district to incorporate a **climate** curriculum, share news of **climate** advocacy work and reach out to local, state and federal legislators to encourage **climate** action. Kids are the next generation of innovators and thinkers. Youth leadership is already making a huge difference. If we nurture a love for the environment early, children may just come up with the best solutions. Don't be surprised if they teach you something, too, along the way. \* Dr. Steph Lee is a pediatrician, preventive medicine specialist and spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. She often speaks about parenting and public health issues, like **climate** action and immigrant health. Connect on social: @stephleemd. Children's health is a continuing series. This week's article is courtesy of the American Academy of Pediatrics. For more information, visit [www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org).

## Graphic

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ASSOCIATED PRESS/THE DAILY COURIER, LES STUKENBERG A plane flies over a wildfire near Crown King, Ariz., Monday. The fire grew to 2,400 acres and forced the evacuation of a remote Northern Arizona mountain community. Associated Press File Photo A wildfire threatens a northern Arizona mountain community. Talk to children about **climate change** when they express concerns about worsening storms and other disasters. Associated Press File Photo A wildfire threatens a northern Arizona mountain community. Talk to children about **climate change** when they express concerns about worsening storms and other disasters. Dr. Steph Lee

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