

Talk to children about the climate crisis

– a guide for teachers,
educators and
school leaders



OUR
KIDS
CLIMATE

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Climate-related anxiety, worry and feeling a lack of hope for the future are growing problems that affect young people’s mental health. Recent surveys from Sweden¹, the UK² and the US³, show that around 6 out of 10 young people are worried or scared about the climate crisis and what their future will look like.

When children and young people learn about the seriousness of the state of the planet, but at the same time do not see that adults are acting in a way that is comparable to the problem, it can lead to anxiety, frustration and anger. Many feel that the adult generation is failing them.

You, as a teacher, educator or school leader, can play a key role in ensuring climate education is being prioritized in your school, and in helping children and young people to deal with emotions and questions related to the climate crisis. The main thing to remember is that all these climate-related emotions that children and young people are feeling, are reasonable and healthy responses to the very serious situation that we’re in.

Schools can play a key role in our response to the climate crisis. We must urgently embed Education For Sustainable Development (ESD), with a focus on the climate crisis, in everything a school does, from the curriculum to reducing the emissions a school generates from its activities and procurement. All young people have a right to science-based education about the environment and the climate crisis, and to emotional support as they’re learning and making their voices heard through civic engagement. They also need the right tools and competencies to be part of a world that will look profoundly different from the world that we grew up in.

Here you’ll find our top tips for how you can become better at meeting students’ questions, feelings and involvement in climate action.

Source/Photographer: Unsplash/Taylor Wilcox



¹ <https://varabarnsklimat.se/novusundersokning-bara-halften-av-unga-tror-att-vi-loser-klimatkrisen/>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51451737>

³ <https://www.kff.org/report-section/the-kaiser-family-foundation-washington-post-climate-change-survey-main-findings/>

Do!

1

Tell the truth, but point out that it's not a done deal

Every step now matters. When you talk about the climate, be brave and let the students fully explore the causes, effects and consequences for people, animals and nature. With current political commitments, we're on the path to over three degrees of warming within our children's lifetimes, according to researchers. What does that mean? Who is responsible for changing the course that we're on? Why is what we do here in our own country important? When deep-diving into the climate crisis, you must also focus on creating hope. Show how people, organizations and companies are working hard to improve the situation. Find local heroes that inspire. Speak about how humanity has solved difficult problems in the past, and how that happened. It's important to emphasize that every action plays a role, but that big problems require big change at the societal and political levels.

2

Talk about feelings

How does it feel in our bodies when we talk about the climate crisis? The sometimes difficult feelings that can arise when we are faced with the seriousness of the climate crisis, are healthy and reasonable reactions to the situation, therefore it's important to welcome them and talk about them. Helping students name those emotions is central to helping them build emotional resilience and the ability to handle information about the climate. By helping students put into words how they feel, they can use those feelings to take action. By talking about emotions, it's also easier for young people to find others who feel the same, and want to do something about the situation. This helps tackle the loneliness that many young people feel when it comes to worrying about the climate crisis and the future.

3

Enable collective action

Taking action together with others for a more sustainable world is key, both to help students manage their climate-related feelings, but also to give them an early experience of being able to influence society in a positive direction. Remember that it is important as a teacher, educator or school leader to show that you are also involved and ready to do your bit, together or in parallel with the students. Show students how collective action can have an effect locally, nationally and internationally. Remember that creating change locally is a great way to empower students and show how change can happen if we take collective action.

4

Build resilience

Our children will grow up in a climate-changed world, and we need to prepare them for that. What tools and skills do we need in that context? Can young people get involved in redesigning the schoolyard and planting more trees that provide shade, as heatwaves and droughts become more intense? What about growing food on the school property? Is it possible to put pressure on schools and municipalities to install solar panels on the school roof? The skills that students need to adapt to a world in crisis are the same competencies that will help them manage climate-related emotions: acting together with others, thinking critically and being solution-oriented.

5

Create visions

A great way to create hope, commitment and find new paths to getting involved, is to engage students in creating their version of a sustainable world. From there, you can work backwards in talking about how we can get there and which steps we need to take first. The school context is a great place to help students shape visions for a sustainable world. Many creative subjects lend themselves well to this work, for example writing, arts, crafts, music and home economics.

6

Explore nature

There's a lot of research showing the benefits of being in nature to children's well-being and learning. Stimulating a love and nurture of nature is also strongly connected to taking environmental actions later in life. Remember, we won't protect what we don't know. Being in nature also has an impact on stress levels and learning abilities. Think about how you can stimulate the students' connection to nature as part of teaching. Is it possible, for example, to carry out part of the class outdoors? Is it possible to grow food at your school? Is it possible to take the children on local field trips to see nature?

7

Connect with parents

A great way to help students manage the information about the climate crisis, especially those experiencing climate-related anxiety, is to connect with parents. Do tell them that you are discussing this in the classroom, and invite them to talk more about the topic at home. Remember that talking about the causes of the climate crisis, and the role that we all play, can raise questions in young people about how the family lives and what choices are made. Think about whether it's possible to develop a guide for parents as part of your climate education, or feel free to share our guide: "Talk to children about the climate crisis – a guide for parents and other adults".



The pitfalls

1

Talk without action

When students learn about the climate and the planetary crisis and at the same time don't see that the school (or adults around them) actively take part in the solutions, this can create confusion and frustration. Remember that feelings from across the spectrum, from concern to anger is something positive, it means we've understood the situation. There are also strong links between concerns and increased commitment. However, if students show signs of powerlessness, hopelessness and loneliness, it's extra important to work actively with these emotions by talking about the situation, our feelings and what we can do to create change.

2

Focus too much on lifestyle changes

Be careful not to place the responsibility for the problem on the individual, especially young people – or suggest that the solution lies primarily at the individual level. Students understand that more recycling or vegan diets alone will not solve the climate crisis. And it's hard to be fossil-free in a fossil fuelled system. In addition, research shows that most people are pretty bad at choosing the most effective things to tackle climate change at home. We are often governed by habits, values, money and social structures. Keep in mind that young people may have limited opportunities to control their families' lifestyle and consumption choices. In addition, they easily feel guilt and shame about their own behavior, which are feelings that we do not want climate education to create.

3

Say that everything will be fine

Be careful in giving assurances that everything will be fine. This can lead to students not feeling listened to, or science not taken seriously. We know that the world will look very different in the next 30 years, even if we don't know exactly what the future will entail. Resist the temptation to jump straight from the problem to the solutions without giving young people time to reflect on the impacts the climate crisis is having today, and how it might impact their lives going forward. We need to be mindful that even if we stop burning fossil fuels today, our climate will keep changing due to delays in the climate system.

4

Believe that new technology solves all problems

New technology and innovation are part of the solution, but will not alone tackle the climate crisis. The most important thing is that we quickly stop emitting greenhouse gases – turning off the tap at its source. Putting too much emphasis on solutions that students know at present are only fantasies, can instead create more loneliness and hopelessness. We need to change our Western societies at their core, no new technology will be able to help us continue the way we're going. However, bear in mind that talking about new innovations and ideas is also something that many students find exciting, and it can contribute to creating hope. Thus, balance is key.

5

Say that young people will solve the climate crisis

Be careful to suggest that it is today's young people who will "save the world". The next few years are critical in terms of eliminating greenhouse gas emissions and putting our societies on a more sustainable path, long before most young people are even allowed to vote in general elections. Since us adults have created the crisis, we must lead the way in resolving it. However, normalizing sustainable behavior and civic engagement from an early age is key in realizing the UN Global Goals. To offer students many opportunities for action and participation is central, especially for those young people who are experiencing climate-related anxiety or frustration.

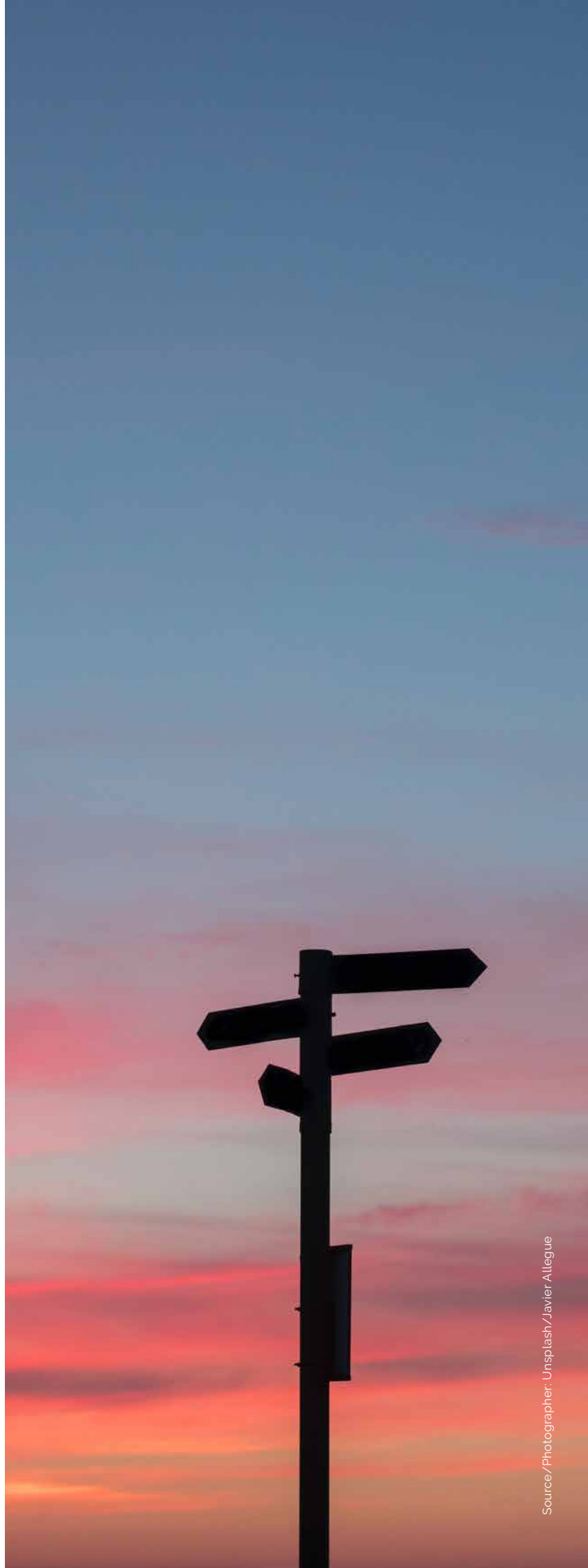
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OUR KIDS' CLIMATE

Our Kids' Climate is a network of 58 parent groups from 23 countries who are uniting for climate action to protect the kids we love from the climate crisis.

We act because we must for our kids, many of them too young to make their voices heard and to vote. We believe that working with parents on climate has the potential to move mountains - because that's what we do for our kids every day.

Want to get in touch? Visit www.ourkidsclimate.org or send us an e-mail: hello@ourkidsclimate.org.