



Truth without trauma

talking
with
children
about
climate
change

LifeKind
GROWING RESILIENCE

a warm welcome

This short ebook, I hope, will outline why talking about climate change is so vitally important right now and how we can go about it in a more resilient and resourceful way.

Whether this is completely new territory for you or you are looking for more support on the ongoing journey, I hope you will find it helpful.

With all best wishes

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For more resources, ideas and courses please find me at

www.jomcandrews.com




Truth without trauma

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A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, kissing a young child on the cheek. The child has light hair and is looking down with a somber expression. The image is partially obscured by a large white circular graphic on the left side.

WE CAN'T PROTECT
OUR CHILDREN FROM
THE IMPACT OF
CLIMATE CHANGE
BUT WE CAN
PROTECT THEM
FROM BEING ALONE
WITH IT.

Why is talking about climate change important?

Climate change is urgent and real. The life support systems on this planet are being severely compromised to the extent that our children's lives are certain to be vastly different from our own. Children and young people are hearing and learning about this in many different ways and it is affecting their mental health and their everyday functioning.

Our children need us to step up to the challenge of preparing them for the present and future that faces them. If we do not talk to them about this huge threat to every part of life on earth, if we keep quiet and pretend that everything is fine, then we leave them to bear it alone. We risk causing them the deep pain of moral injury, the betrayal of being deceived by those we trust.

We can start now to learn how to listen to our children's fears, to respond wisely to our young people's questions. We can learn how to accompany our children and we will get better at it the more we practice.

Talking about climate change is not the job of only teachers and therapists. The adults closest to children are the ones needed to have these conversations. It is part of parenting, part of everyday life wherever children spend their time, wherever there are adults who want to be trustworthy.

We live in cultures that are not used to attending to children's feelings, not accustomed to listening deeply to anxiety or anger without trying to make it go away. These may be new skills that we need to learn. We likely did not have the experience, when we were children ourselves, of having our feelings being taken seriously as well as our questions answered. Many of us are learning from scratch.

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We can start now to learn how to listen to our children's fears, to respond wisely to our young people's questions.

We need to learn this and we can. It is urgent. Our children need us to be there for them in the face of what is happening.

A WORD ABOUT ECO-ANXIETY



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Open and honest conversations about climate change will create the environment for resilience.

Children’s fear about the climate and ecological crisis has become normal and widespread. There is already a lot of pressure on young people, a school system that operates on stress, a brutal dismantling of services to support children’s safety and wellbeing. Rates of mental distress have soared during the Covid pandemic. It is more important than ever that parents and other adults learn to support young people with their feelings as well as with their thinking.



Eco anxiety is the fear of environmental catastrophe. It is a normal response to a real situation. It is not something wrong with the child who experiences it - there is good reason to be anxious. However anxiety is greatly reduced when the child is not left alone with it. They need adults to take their feelings seriously, show that they understand and not try to dismiss or distract the child away from their feelings.

SPENDING TIME OUTDOORS

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Spending time with your child outdoors is a hugely powerful way of resourcing them to be resilient and active in the face of climate change

Humans are part of nature; we evolved living mainly outdoors for hundreds of thousands of years. This is our home. Developing a love for nature and a feeling of belonging on the earth is exactly what children need to grow healthily and to act wisely to protect our life systems. Unstructured time to play and explore builds a lifetime of resourcefulness.

Knowing their own environment thoroughly will teach them about the wider world and allow for many opportunities to talk about how climate change is impacting all of life. This time outside with our children also builds health and resilience for adults and is an important part of the support system we all need.



THE NEED FOR COMPASSION AND GENTLENESS FOR OURSELVES



This is hard and distressing work. There is a lot we need to face as parents and adults who care about children. We do not get enough support and we are needing to learn new skills. We will have big feelings ourselves when we engage with climate change; we need support, yet it is not always easy to find. If you are struggling and confused, angry or scared, please know that you are not alone. We will always make mistakes and it is never too late to mend them.

Your wellbeing is the most important thing to your child so you deserve huge support and care. Please find others who can support and accompany you in this work. As a start, the Climate Psychology Alliance offers support and information. Also look out for local and national climate action parent groups.

What are children asking about climate change?

Here are some questions that children have asked about climate change:

"Are humans going to be extinct in my lifetime?"

"Will my children have to eat insects?"

"How will my children grow up?"

"Should I not have children?"

"I am frightened I am going to die"

"Do I have a future?"

"Is it my fault or my parents fault?"

"Why don't people care?"

"Why have the adults done this?"

"Why aren't people doing anything?"

"Is it too late?"

"What made it all go wrong?"

It can be deeply distressing for adults to hear these sorts of questions from the children they care about. Many of us want to protect children from these sorts of awful thoughts. But if we don't address them head on then we are failing to protect our children from the anxious aloneness that they are likely to feel.

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It is a big jump but we adults need to take it; we need to get really good at talking with children about climate change.



WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

It is easy to say that we need to tell our children the truth. Climate change involves some very distressing truths but this is not a simple issue. How do we know which bit of truth to tell and how do we communicate it in a way that supports the child's understanding?

It is true that it is too late now to avoid changes to the global climate patterns that are already causing and will increase devastation and loss of life for many people around the world. It is true that many species of animal, bird and insect have become extinct. It is also true that there is still much that can be saved if we act soon enough. It is true that politicians and businesses are refusing to act quickly enough and it is also true that millions of people are taking strong and hopeful action that could make all the difference. It is true that individual lifestyle changes are no longer going to stop climate change and it is also true that it is still very powerful to live in more earth friendly ways that support a whole system change perspective.

Three stories we can tell about climate change

Just keep going

In this story those of us who live in more privileged countries where climate change has not yet devastated our lives, can pretend that everything is normal, that nothing is changing. We keep believing that the way we live is good enough and maybe unchangeable. In this story maybe we acknowledge that climate change is a threat, but we are confident that the people in charge wouldn't let anything too bad happen to us and we believe government claims that they have it in hand. We have hope that technology will help us carry on as usual. Electric aeroplanes and cars will save the day. This is the story that most media is rooted in.

Catastrophe

In this story we learn more about climate change and we realise that we are in trouble. The science is clear that it is too late to avoid global devastation of our eco-systems. We realise that climate change is shorthand for the upheaval of everything we know. Social disruption, food shortages, war, mass extinction of species, mass migration of people trying to survive. We can get immersed in this story and think it is the only truth.

Change

In the story of change we recognise that nothing will ever be the same again and that we have to adapt and do things differently. In this story we recognise that there are extraordinary people all over the world who are committed to ideas and projects that meet the needs of this time. Millions of people are involved in life protecting action and they are having a strong impact. In this story we can be part of the change needed to protect life and we can join with others in creating a whole new possibility for how to go forward.

There is truth in each of these stories. Right now, they all exist at once. We can support our children in being part of the story of change, a story of active hope and empowerment. We can do this while also being honest about how much danger our planet is in.

Seven steps for a resilient climate conversation

Here are some ideas for how to have climate change conversations without traumatising your child or creating more anxiety. Obviously it is not possible to create a script because every conversation depends on this moment, this child, this adult, this relationship, but these steps will help you to have a confident talk with your child about any sensitive subject.

It helps to be clear about the outcome of the conversation that you are aiming for. It is not just about climate change education and information; it is about building trust and skills for ongoing talking and learning. Hopefully this will be one of many conversations, so the really important thing is to show that you are able to engage with the child in whatever they want to talk about, taking their ideas, questions and feelings seriously.

A conversation will go well when the adult is warm, calm and able to regulate their own feelings about this subject and is able to bear whatever the child says. If you are not in this state then it may be a good idea to pause the conversation until you can find your way back to it. We all need support in this - other adults who can offer kind empathy and understanding of our experience.

This is not about giving a lecture about climate change. I do not suggest sitting your child down and initiating a big conversation about the state of the planet. It is important to take things at the pace your child initiates.

If they are very involved in activism and want to be very engaged then yes, jump in with them. If they are younger and mainly interested in butterflies and frogs then talk with them about those. Include how butterflies and frogs are under threat from ecological damage but keep it appropriate to how much they can understand. Tell them about projects that are working to protect butterflies and frogs and encourage your child to take action too.



It is not just about climate change education; it is about building trust and skills for ongoing talking.

Please be very careful not to give your child the message that they are responsible for saving the world. No one thing that they do will make the changes needed. If they forget to recycle their plastic or switch a light off, they are not contributing to climate change. The message needs to be that adults are taking responsibility and that children's support and action is welcome. We can all be part of the story of change but we can't do it alone. We need each other.



1

LISTEN TO WHAT THE CHILD ASKS OR SAYS

Your child may already be asking you questions about climate change. Or you may want to initiate a conversation to check if they are worrying but not telling you. You could ask an open question like 'I am wondering if you know anything about climate change?' This would offer an invitation that you are up for talking about it without launching into a lecture that the child is not ready to hear. The older your child, the more likely they will know something and are likely to have questions and worries. Listen more than talk and take what they say very seriously. The more you listen the more your child will be able to open up about what they are thinking and feeling.



2

EMPATHISE WITH THE QUESTION

Acknowledge the importance of the question and how it might feel to be for the child to be living with it. 'That is a very big question to be holding. It must be really scary to be worrying about human extinction'

This allows for emotional connection between you and builds trust. It gives you a chance to put yourself in the position of the child and show that you care.



3

ASK FOR MORE CONTEXT AND INFORMATION

For example, where did you hear this, what do you think about it, how do you feel? It really helps to know where a question is coming from and to hear more about what the child already thinks. You might ask 'what do you know already about this?' or 'what do you think?' You will find out a lot more if you listen some more here. This step will also allow the child to express the deeper picture underneath their question.



4

BE CURIOUS ABOUT HOW THE CHILD FEELS

Focus on the child's feelings before moving onto 'facts' and information. 'Are you scared about the future?' 'Are you feeling really angry and confused about why the governments are not doing more to stop this?' Be curious about how they feel and what it is like to see things from their point of view. It can be more powerful to guess than to ask 'how do you feel?' You may be able to express something that the child has no language for or dare not say. If you get it wrong you won't be planting ideas, just showing them that you can bear the difficult stuff, that you are a safe person to talk with because you can really accompany them whatever they feel.



5

SHARE THOUGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE QUESTION

When you have really listened to the question and explored the child's feelings about it, you can move onto thinking about the information they are asking for. It is fine not to know the answer. You can offer to do some research to find out about it. This allows you to mediate the information you find out and to pass it to your child in a way that is appropriate to their age and capacity.

It is important that you always include some message of active hope, some positive action or project that is happening somewhere in the world. This is different from dismissive positive thinking ('don't worry, everything will be fine') which doesn't help. Your child needs to know that adults are acting on this and that there are many ways of contributing to change.



6

ATTEND TO THE END OF THE CONVERSATION

It is important to end the conversation carefully. Many conversations with children end abruptly because something happens to distract the adult. Thank your child for talking to you about this, that you appreciate their openness. Ask if their question has been answered enough for now and if they are happy with what you have agreed to research for them. Be clear about your next steps (eg I will look it up and we will talk about it again tomorrow after school).



7

REFLECT ON THE CONVERSATION AND GET SUPPORT

Talking about climate change is emotionally stirring. It can leave adults with feelings of grief, confusion, anger, sadness, powerlessness. If you want to be an ongoing source of support for the children in your life then it will really help to think about what went well and what was challenging in this conversation, how did your child respond, how did you feel during it and how do you feel now? Talking it through with someone you trust will help you feel more and more prepared and skilful for further conversations.

Seven steps for a resilient climate conversation

- 1 Listen to what the child asks or says
- 2 Empathise with the question
- 3 Ask for more context and information
- 4 Be curious about how the child feels
- 5 Share thoughts/knowledge about the question
- 6 Attend to the end of the conversation
- 7 Reflect on the conversation and get support

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the really important thing is to show that you are able to engage with the child in whatever they want to talk about, taking their ideas, questions and feelings seriously.



This is a brief introduction to a huge subject. I wish you well with the deep work of caring for children at this very challenging time. Each time you meet a child with warmth, curiosity and honesty, you are growing their resilience for a very uncertain future. We wish our children did not have to face what is happening - but we can accompany and support them to meet it with strength and flexibility, to be part of a new generation of resourced and life-protecting adults.

for more resources and ideas about supporting children in the face of climate change, visit

www.jomcandrews.com