

Parents and the Climate Crisis

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Photos for cover collage by Eli Crawford and Dale Eoarts

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ISBN: 978-1-58429-245-6

\$3.00 (U.S.)

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Parents and the Climate Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Our love and caring for our children is powerful. We love our children with all our hearts, and we want their lives to go well. We would do anything to assure that they not only survive but also thrive and lead happy and meaningful lives.

Being a parent can bring the climate crisis front and center, largely because of our love for our children. Our deep connection with them helps us turn our minds and hearts toward the future. That's one of the advantages of being a parent. The future well-being of our children and grandchildren inspires us to address the climate emergency.

We are deeply aware of what growing young humans need. We know that they need clean, healthy air and water. They need spaces where they can run and play. And we know that the climate crisis must be solved in order to meet these current and future needs.

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment. And it cannot be done without addressing racism, genocide toward Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, anti-Semitism, LGBTQ* oppression, and other oppressions. Solving the climate emergency will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of both climate change and oppression. As parents we can play a significant role in building this movement.

You may ask, "How can parents make a difference in this movement?" Being a parent can be overwhelming, and thinking about the climate crisis can be overwhelming, too. You may also ask, "How can we help our children face the climate crisis?"

* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

In this pamphlet we will discuss the following:

- How can I make a difference on the climate crisis? Is my voice significant?
- How can I pay attention to the climate crisis when I am already overwhelmed with being a parent and trying to raise a family?
- How do I handle racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressions that affect my family, and address the climate crisis at the same time?
- How do I talk with my child about the climate crisis? How do I help them with their fears about it?
- How can I unload my own fears, so I don't communicate worry to my children? How do I get support for myself?
- How can I partner with my children to address the climate crisis?
- How do we build a new world based on people caring about each other and treating each other well?



AYOKA KILLINGS

HOW CAN I MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS? IS MY VOICE SIGNIFICANT?

It's easy for many of us to feel that our contribution won't make a difference. However, we don't have to be experts on politics or the science of climate change to have an effect. It's often not the "experts" that move an issue forward. Rather, it's someone who has a human voice that can communicate the importance of an issue.

Climate change is an important issue for all human beings and especially the next generations, and to turn it around large numbers of people will need to understand this. If we talk with our friends and relatives, we will be making a significant difference.

As parents, we are in a unique position to influence the people around us. We are in contact with many other parents and interact with schools and other institutions that affect families. We have the authority to speak about issues having to do with young people and families. We can be bold in loving people and sharing information about the climate. And, like most other people, we have more power to change things than we feel like we do.

Many parents have been taking leadership in powerful ways to stop environmental destruction and climate change. Here are a few examples:

- In communities targeted by racism, mothers have organized to reduce pollution from companies whose practices have caused asthma among their children.
- Parents in Kenya have organized against governments and corporations, protesting pollution from manufacturing and oil exploration. They also have led protests against the governments' efforts to convert parks and forests into building developments.

- Mothers of the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arika Nation in North Dakota, USA, are standing up against mega oil and gas projects on their reservation. And they are getting support from Indigenous women's groups in Colombia, Guatemala, Israel, Kenya, Nepal, and Nicaragua.

- A group of U.S. grandparents and parents successfully lobbied their county government to set a goal of reaching eighty percent renewable energy by 2030 and a hundred percent by 2050.

- A group of parents in Canada got their school board to declare a climate emergency and establish targets consistent with the call by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees. And they led other school districts to do the same.

- In Nicaragua, Indigenous Miskito mothers are mobilizing against extractive industries.

Getting the support of a friend or another parent can help us muster the courage to be vocal. It is often better to go to a meeting or write a letter with others than to do it solo. Before and after a meeting or other action, we can share our hopes and worries; afterward we can appreciate each other and talk about next steps.

HOW CAN I PAY ATTENTION TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS WHEN I AM ALREADY OVERWHELMED WITH BEING A PARENT AND TRYING TO RAISE A FAMILY?

Being a parent is not an easy task. In fact, it is hard and getting harder. We don't have the time we need to parent. We would like more time to play with our children; enjoy our families; and just think, and recover from everyday challenges.

COVID has helped us understand that raising young people is a job all by itself. It's very difficult, sometimes impossible, to meet the demands of parenting and to work a paid job at the same time.

As parents we are not paid for the work of raising children—work that is essential to the well-being of society. On top of that, in our paid jobs many of us have to work increasingly long hours for less pay, making it difficult to support our families. We don't have enough time for our children, our partners, or our extended families. Then we feel bad about ourselves because we can't parent in the way we would like to.

Furthermore, we are blamed when our children have difficulties and struggles. We are told that they must get good grades, be “well behaved,” look a particular way, and so on, or we are bad parents and they will not have good lives.

It's important to remember that even when they have some struggles, *our children are good, and we are good parents*. The problem is bigger than us! Schools and other institutions do not have enough resources to adequately support children and parents.

Although society doesn't support us, we can build support around ourselves. Talking and listening to each other can help us realize that our struggles are similar to those of other parents and not blame ourselves or each other for our struggles. By coming together with other parents, we can build a different kind of culture—one based on caring and meeting human needs. Mutual support can also give us the space to turn our minds to the climate emergency and think about how to talk about it with our children in a way that will empower them and not scare them.

Some of the following sections of this pamphlet describe how we can set up support for ourselves as parents and overcome feelings of being overwhelmed, so we can think about the climate emergency.



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DALE EVARTS



GINNIE HERBERT

HOW DO I HANDLE RACISM, SEXISM, CLASSISM, AND OTHER OPPRESSIONS THAT AFFECT MY FAMILY, AND ADDRESS THE CLIMATE CRISIS AT THE SAME TIME?

Our world faces many challenges in addition to the climate crisis. Racism, sexism, classism, young people's oppression, and other oppressions affect our families, our communities, and our world. Can we pay attention to the climate emergency and also address these other problems?

It turns out we *have* to address racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression to solve the climate crisis.

Our economic systems are based on exploitation and oppression, with little regard for people, other life forms, or the Earth. Racism, class oppression, sexism, and other oppressions inflict tremendous injustices, limit access to resources, and have long-lasting negative impacts on the lives of billions of people.

Oppression also systematically divides us from each other. It keeps us from coming together as a unified and powerful community of people of all backgrounds and economic classes—and that coming together is the quickest path to stopping climate change and the degradation of the environment.

Climate change disproportionately affects people of color, poor people, Indigenous people, and women, and these same groups have fewer resources to mitigate its effects. If we are going to build a worldwide community that cares for all children, we need to make sure that no group is targeted.

People with privilege are told that everything will be okay even as others are hurt by the climate crisis. Such false messages lull people into inaction and keep them believing they are separate from others when in fact the climate crisis will make the planet unlivable for everyone.

We love our children with all our hearts. It breaks our hearts when they are hurt by poverty, racism, sexism, class oppression, and all the other oppressions. As parents, we can stand up together against these disorders of society. And our children will get a sense of hope when they see us standing together.

HOW DO I TALK WITH MY CHILD ABOUT THE CLIMATE CRISIS? HOW DO I HELP THEM WITH THEIR FEARS ABOUT IT?

As with all big and little issues we need to talk about with our children, we start by listening. They may bring their concerns to us first. Or we might ask them what they have heard about the climate emergency. While hanging out, snuggling together, driving together in a car, or talking after a ball game, we can ask them what they've heard and what they are thinking about it. Chances are they already know more than we think. The conversations are all around us.

We want to communicate confidence that people can solve the crisis instead of communicating our worries or feelings of hopelessness. This is easier said than done. (In the next section, we'll talk about how we can deal with our own feelings so we can listen and connect with our children on this topic.)

We can tell our children that many people in the world are working hard to solve the climate emergency and making important gains. We can find examples of hopeful things people are doing and talk about them. We can share stories of the many young people who are leading in the climate movement. People have made many important gains, and we can learn about them together with our children. We might also ask our children what they think people should do to solve the problem.

We can show our children that we care about every human and every living thing in the world and that we are going to help everyone have good lives. Even if we can't take steps at this particular moment, for young people to know that their parents care about everyone is reassuring. And if we can take some small steps, that is reassuring, too.

Our children may need to cry about how scared they are about the climate crisis or other things. That's okay. All people have big feelings. Crying, laughing, trembling, raging, and talking are some of the ways people get out their feelings. Some people believe we should stop young people from crying—that stopping them will stop them from hurting. However, crying, laughing, trembling, and having tantrums are ways that young people, and all people, heal from hurts and worries.

Young people often work through their worries by playing and laughing. If we can take a little time every day, or even once a week, and put aside everything on our “to do” list and give them our undivided, enthusiastic attention, they will notice, and it will bring them closer to us. We can set a timer for anywhere between ten minutes and an hour and let them know that during that time we will make them a priority.

During these special play times, we can follow their lead. We can let them be the one to choose what to play and how to play it. Our beaming smile and delight with whatever they do will make a difference. Playing with our children and following their direction is one of the most reassuring things we can do with them. And when there is a lot of stress (like during COVID), family play, especially in which young people get to win, is healing and creates resiliency.

When we are playing with our children, if they laugh, it's good to keep doing whatever made them laugh. Laughing is good for young people (as it is for parents).

Children also need to cry, tremble, and sometimes rage. As parents, we can listen to our children and look into their eyes when they are showing us hard feelings. We can show them that we really want to hear what they are telling us. They may not be able to tell us in words, and that's okay.

We don't need to correct them or discuss the issue when they are showing us their feelings. Usually listening is the best thing we can do. When they've had a chance to express their feelings, they will often brighten up and want to play or talk or come close to us, or they may just fall into a good sleep.

Sometimes our children get very upset about things that seem little and unimportant to us. Often their upset is actually about something else that they can't explain in words or talk about directly. They may not even know themselves what the deeper issue is. But that doesn't matter, because if they are crying or raging, and so on, they are healing from it on an unconscious level. Whatever they are upset about, we can be sympathetic and understanding, even if to us it doesn't seem that important. We may never know what the deeper issue is, which can be frustrating for us as parents. But we can be reassured that our children are doing what they need to in order to set things right for themselves.

HOW CAN I UNLOAD MY OWN FEARS, SO I DON'T COMMUNICATE WORRY TO MY CHILDREN? HOW DO I GET SUPPORT FOR MYSELF?

As parents we often worry. We worry about our children and whether they will be okay in this world. We worry about the climate emergency. Our worries don't help us or our children. They get in the way of our enjoying our children and figuring out how to take action to solve the climate crisis.

Just the way that our children need to unload feelings with our attention, we need to unload our worries and upsets with someone listening to us. We, too, need to talk, cry, rage, laugh, and shake about things that worried us when we were little and things that worry us now.

We have fears that started when we were children. Most likely, we didn't get the kind of reassurance we needed when we were young, and there's a good chance our parents didn't listen to us so we could tell them all the things we were upset about. We had to numb ourselves and function, because that was what grown-ups required of us.

Hard and hurtful things happened to all of us. If we didn't get the chance to heal from them, they now get in the way of our confidence and ability to think, enjoy life, try new things, and connect with others.

We can find another parent to form a listening partnership with and take turns talking and listening to each other. We can also set up a support group of parents and take turns listening to each other.

Here's how to set up and participate in a listening exchange:

Two (or more) parents take turns listening to each other without interruption. The exchange can be as short as a few minutes each or as long as the two people agree upon. It can be in person, on the phone, or on Zoom or another platform.

The first person talks about whatever they want to talk about. The listener pays interested, warm attention and doesn't interrupt to give advice, comment, or tell how they feel. The listener also welcomes and supports any expressions of emotion and reassures the person talking that emotional release is part of a natural healing process. After the agreed-upon time, the talker becomes the listener, and the one who listened talks about anything they want to talk about.



JENNY SAZAMA

The listener never tells anyone what the talker has said. It needs to be kept confidential. They don't even refer back to it later with the talker, unless they ask for permission first. (The talker may not want it brought up in another context.)

Listening exchanges release tensions that interfere with our thinking and functioning, including our ability to think when parenting gets hard.

At the end of a listening exchange, it's good to talk about something that's been going well in parenting or some other part of our life. That helps us shift our mind from the hard things to the good things.

We can do these listening exchanges with other parents we know. Everybody is struggling, and it helps to build trust with someone and share about the difficulties of parenting. We can set a regular time in the week to do a listening exchange. It's also helpful, if possible, to agree to being able to call each other when things get hard.

HOW CAN I PARTNER WITH MY CHILDREN TO ADDRESS THE CLIMATE CRISIS?

Putting time and attention into parenting is, in itself, a way of being an activist. Raising young people who are engaged in the issues of our time is a major way to have an impact.

Staying close to our children and valuing their leadership increases their faith in themselves and the world. And partnering with them and finding ways to support them in taking action deepens our relationship with them, as it's grounded in our respect for their ideas and perspectives. It can also bring great joy and a hopeful perspective to our own activism.

If we feel urgent, uninformed, or unsure of where to start, working with young people can help us slow down, can offer ways to learn what we don't know, and can create a path toward building community. The young people leading in the climate movement do it with laughter and song and are constantly bringing along new friends.

Organizing goes better for everyone when people do it together. We can gather with other parents and children who are concerned about the climate emergency. We can build community together and choose actions that keep the young people at the center and that are joyful and meaningful for all.

Here are some examples of what parents have done with their children:

- A group of parents led a Mother's Day event outside an elected official's home. Parents and children wrote letters and drew pictures about what they loved about nature. To live music, the families lined up and put the letters in the elected official's mailbox and chalked the sidewalk in front of his house. All this, and the little ones got home for naptime!

- Children have participated in tree-planting programs in Kenya. (Planting trees reduces carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and boosts the production of oxygen.)

- Parents have shared with their children empowering videos of young people talking about the climate crisis and information about the Fridays for Future strikes, which take place all over the world.

- Parents have gathered together to release ladybugs, drawn with chalk outside the buildings of fossil fuel funders (with people taking turns to re-chalk each day), and done “play-ins” outside large corporations as a form of protest. The playfulness and joy at the center of their actions have made people want to participate and left them energized and connected rather than deflated and urgent.

- Parents have supported young people in their leadership of youth-led organizations, such as the Sunrise Movement.

- COVID has opened up the possibilities of virtual organizing, especially for older young people. Digital strikes, tweet storms, and viral videos have been used to challenge politicians and share information. Participating in these activities with our children can be fun and help them know that we are on their side.

As children get older, they will have more questions and greater exposure to information from the outside world. It’s important to be thoughtful about what kind of information they have access to. We know how we feel about the information we are exposed to and whether it leaves us feeling scared and powerless or informed and inspired. We can notice how our children respond. Are they interested for a bit and then disinterested? They have likely hit their saturation point and need some laughter and connection. Are they desperately trying to finish an

article even though it's late at night or insisting on going to a protest even though they are sick? They likely need some playfulness and laughter so they can undo their fears and keep connection and their own well-being at the center.

As parents, we are always trying to think about what our children need. This is especially challenging as they get older and may disagree with us about what they need. We have to be mindful of our tendency to presume that our way is the right way, while simultaneously trusting ourselves as parents to have judgment. (Parents are central in providing perspective and judgment.) When should we let our children be in charge, and when do we need to step in? This is an eternal parenting question. It will make an enormous difference if we can develop a partnership with our children—if we can think about actions together with them, jointly decide what to do, and work hard to follow their lead.

As children grow older, they will have more of their own connections and want to do more and more on their own. As parents we can follow them on social media, do things together as often as they will allow, and continue to keep the conversations open and real. It's good to be a sounding board for their judgment, a trusted ally to call on when something is challenging or confusing. And, perhaps most important, they get to know we are in their corner.

HOW DO WE BUILD A NEW WORLD BASED ON PEOPLE CARING ABOUT EACH OTHER AND TREATING EACH OTHER WELL?

The climate crisis requires us to recognize that the well-being of each of us depends on the well-being of all communities and all human beings and other living things. Our world is tied together. Our atmosphere knows no borders. Our children will be excited to learn about

people around the world and how they are dealing with the crisis. The cultures of Indigenous people emphasize the interrelatedness of all living things on Earth. We can follow their lead in living in harmony with the Earth's resources.

As parents we can partner with our children and other parents to build communities of people around us who can listen to each other, care about each other, and figure out how to be powerful together in addressing the climate emergency. By building listening partnerships, we can heal from the hurts that keep us feeling discouraged, powerless, and alone. There is much to be hopeful about. And we can remember that we are good, and that our children are good, too!



DALE EVARTS