

Talking to children about climate change

Dr Aimee Maxwell

Educational and Developmental Psychologist

Honesty
Room for feelings
No doomerism
A shared task
Hope

You don't need perfect words

What are you most worried you might get wrong?

Offer honest loving company, not a guaranteed ending.

Hearing is not the same as understanding.

WHAT THEY HEARD or SAW

News. School. A Reel. A video
An overheard adult
conversation.

WHAT IT MEANS TO THEM

Is it happening here?
Is it happening tonight?
Am I meant to fix it?

Ask about the meaning, not just the information.

For some children, it's already happened.

Fire, smoke, flood, heat
or school disruption may
already be part of their own
story

What is happening now?
What are the adults doing?
What happens next?

Silence is not proof of recovery.
Invite conversation without requiring it.

Change the scale, not the truth.

3–6

Keep it limited.

Simple explanations.
Safety today.
Familiar routines.

7–11

Explain and unburden.

Causes and fairness.
A manageable part to
play.
Not theirs to fix.
What's working well

12–18

Respect complexity.

Evidence and uncertainty.
Values and choice.
Open conversations.

Use age as a guide, not a rule. Adapt pace, language and sensory demands.

Five Tasks

1

Regulate

Steady yourself

2

Ask

Find the
question

3

Tell carefully

Truth in pieces

4

Contain

Stay with the
feeling

5

**Restore
agency**

Choice without
burden

Move between them as needed

1. Regulate

- Notice your urgency
- Pause
- Notice urge to reassure
- Make a little space
- Find adult support for adult feelings

If they noticed your distress:

“I was upset wasn’t I. I’m ok, we all get upset sometimes, I look after my feelings [example, example]. You can ask me questions about that.”

You can be emotional and emotionally available

2. Ask

Do not answer a question the child has not asked.

“What part is worrying you?”

What happened?

“Did you hear something today?”

What does it mean?

“What do you think that means? What are you worried will happen?”

When and where?

“Are you worried about what’s happening here and now – or there and later?”

3. Tell the truth carefully

Answer the actual question. Use short pieces. Pause often. Acknowledge uncertainty. Avoid absolute predictions.

Truth needs pacing.

3. Tell the truth carefully

WHAT WE KNOW

Human activity is warming the planet.

WHAT IS UNCERTAIN

Exactly how a place or person will be affected.

HERE AND NOW

Current conditions, and the actions adults are taking.

One piece of truth. A pause. Check that it makes sense.

4. Contain

“It sounds like you feel frightened – is that right?

You don't have to work it all out right now.

We're safe and ok here, and I'm/we're looking after you/us.”

Name the feeling gently.
Stay present & available.
Orient to immediate safety.
Return to ordinary life.

Containment doesn't shut feelings down or ignore them.

5. Restore agency if needed

Feeling concern/responsibility without power is unhelpful. Action is helpful..

CHILDREN

Choice and participation
Realistic and proportionate

ADULTS AND SYSTEMS

Decisions and responsibilities

Choose something shared, manageable and freely chosen.

Personal habits | family action | community action | civic participation

Replace the promise. Keep the relationship.

THE REFLEX

A MORE USEFUL RESPONSE

“Everything will be fine.”

“I don't know exactly what comes next. You can keep talking with me about it.”

“Your generation will fix it.”

“You can join in, but this isn't yours to carry, we're doing it together”

Language for young children

The Earth is getting warmer because people have used a lot of fuels that make the air hold more heat. Many grown-ups are working on ways to make this better.

Avoid irreversible catastrophe and global predictions.

“Is our house going to burn down?”

**First ask what they heard.
Check the actual situation.**

This wording is only for
when there is no current
fire threat where you are.

“There isn't a fire threatening
our house right now.
I check the warnings and
look after our plan.
You don't need to keep watch.”

During danger, follow the safety plan and explain the upcoming step.

Language for primary school children

Climate change is serious. It is a problem for adults in governments, communities, science and businesses to work on together. You can be part of caring, but it's not your job to fix it.

Return responsibility to adults and systems.

“Why are we driving if cars harm the planet?”

Defend the trip?
Deliver the science?
Dismiss the worry?

Try curiosity first.

“What worries you about this trip?”

“The adults are responsible for our transport decisions. We can choose one manageable thing to do together.”

Language for adolescents - honest solidarity

You're right that the situation is serious - I can't pretend otherwise. I also don't want you to carry it alone. What do you need?

“I can't give you guarantees but I can take your questions seriously, keep talking about what matters to you and help you choose where to put your energy.”

“There’s no point planning a future.”

“When you say there’s no point, what does that mean for you?”

If you are concerned about safety, ask directly:

“Are you thinking about suicide?”

Immediate danger: stay with them and call 000.

When concern needs more support.

Sadness, worry, grief and anger aren't automatically disorders.

Look at persistence, severity and everyday life.

Sleep, eating, school, friendships, panic, checking or ongoing hopelessness.

Help from your GP, school wellbeing team, psychologist or paediatrician.

Any talk of not wanting to live needs prompt attention.

Keep the conversation open.

Tell the truth in pieces they can hold.
Stay with the feeling.
Keep responsibility where it belongs.

1

Regulate

2

Ask

3

Tell carefully

4

Contain

5

Restore
agency

Hope is not a forecast.

Hope is not certainty about the future. It is a way of meeting the present without surrendering our capacity to care.

We can care without a guarantee.

We can act without carrying everything.

We can keep a life larger than the problem.

Play, pleasure and rest are essential so we can live and work together well

Questions and conversation

What would be most useful to explore together?

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

Ages 5–25 | Free, 24/7

Lifeline

13 11 14

24/7 crisis support | Emergency: 000

Conversations, recovery and support

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/talking-your-child-about-climate-change>

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/communication-and-meaning-making/>

<https://mhpn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/Episode-transcript-What-children-need-during-disaster-recovery.pdf>

What children need during disaster recovery

[Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/anxiety/)

<https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/anxiety/>

Anxiety in children

[headspace](https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/How-to-talk-about-suicide-with-young-people.pdf)

<https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/How-to-talk-about-suicide-with-young-people.pdf>

Direct conversations about suicide and safety

[Kids Helpline / Lifeline](https://www.kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/phone-counselling/)

<https://www.kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/phone-counselling/>