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Climate Just-the-Facts Talk Script for Middle and High School Students

Climate change is affecting our children's and adolescents' mental health.

In a 2022 survey of Gen Z Americans, 75% said they had experienced anxiety, depression or stress as a result of consuming news about climate change. And extreme weather, including heat waves and wildfire smoke, has directly affected the moods, sleep, and mental health of children across the United States just in the past few months.

But caring, supportive adults can help. We can listen and be a sounding board for young people's concerns, provide context for what is happening with the climate, talk about progress and solutions, and support young people to cope and stay mentally healthy.



Here is the essential background for a conversation about climate change and emotions with young people in your life.



Your talking points:

- Burning fossil fuels is changing the climate.
- The effects are serious and unequal.
- There are many available solutions, and you can join the growing momentum for change.
- Climate emotions are real and valid.
- Coping with climate emotions is important. This includes self-care and acting to be part of the solutions.



1. Burning fossil fuels is changing the climate.

The release of greenhouse gas from burning fossil fuels started hundreds of years ago, in the Industrial Revolution. When people began using coal, oil, and natural gas for heating, cooling, lighting, manufacturing, and transportation, pollution was released.

These so-called greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, refrigerants—together act like a blanket, covering the earth and trapping heat in the atmosphere around Earth. As they increase, more and more heat from the sun is trapped, causing warming. Since the late 1800s, human activities have raised the level of carbon dioxide – just one of these greenhouse gasses—in the atmosphere by 50%.

Questions: What do you see happening to the landscape and air where we live? Have you experienced a big storm, a heatwave, a wildfire, wildfire smoke, a flood, or other severe weather event?

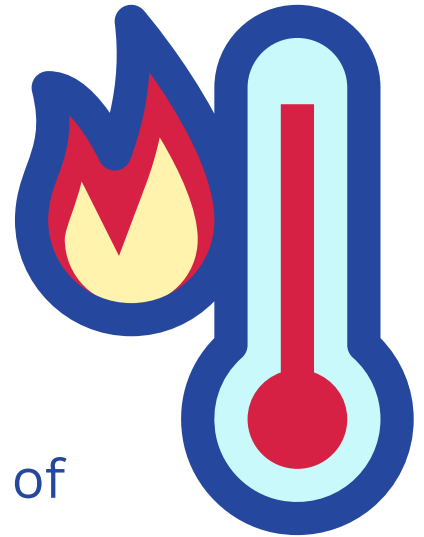


2. The effects are serious and unequal.

Climate change doesn't just mean hotter summers and warmer winters.

Because of greenhouse gasses warming our planet, hotter air increases the evaporation of moisture from the Earth's surface. This means that more water is available in the atmosphere for big rain and snow events and floods. Oceans hold more heat energy than land, energy that feeds bigger hurricanes and typhoons. Increased evaporation also means more drought. Dry plants and trees catch on fire more easily, which means more and bigger wildfires.

In short, burning fossil fuels raises the likelihood of many different extreme weather events. At the same time, human activities damage and destroy natural habitats, causing the extinction of many other species, and raising the chance that new diseases will evolve and spread.





Climate change can force people from their homes because of disasters like hurricanes or wildfires. Droughts and big storms can kill food crops and people. All of these changes can lead to conflict and even war when people are forced to move to new places because of extreme weather or drought. These impacts are felt unequally depending on factors like race, how much money you have, if you live with a disability, and where you live on the planet.

Just 100 fossil fuel companies around the globe (see here for top emitters in the US) have been the source of 71% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988. Some people are getting very wealthy making climate change worse. Politicians have not done what is necessary to stop them. And young people and future generations will feel even more intense impacts





Questions: What are some of the ways you describe your identity?

What do you know about how climate change specifically affects people like you and your family?

How does climate change affect you differently as a young person?



3. There are many available solutions, and you can join the growing momentum for change.

People and communities across the globe are working hard to address climate change. This includes meeting human needs without making climate change worse, and restoring land, air and water so more living things can thrive and so the land can store more carbon.

This shift to sustainable and restorative ways of living is one of the most dramatic changes to our civilization in history. And you have a chance to be a part of it. Change happens through individual actions done together to shift systems-how our food is grown, how we get where we're going, how we heat and cool homes and buildings, and the decisions made by our leaders.



Some of the important ways this is happening:

- Shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy like solar and wind
- Solar capacity in the United States has risen nearly 300-fold since 2008, to 130.9 gigawatts in 2022.
- Changing how we grow food and use land; preserving natural ecosystems and living things. Billions of trees are being planted every year in reforestation efforts.
- Electric cars, public transportation, bicycling, and living in walkable neighborhoods to reduce pollution from transportation. Electric car demand is booming, and is set to increase to 1 in 5 cars by 2023.
- Electrifying buildings, electric or induction stoves, LED lights, and using electric heating and cooling. The number of heat pumps, which warm and cool buildings using electricity without needing to burn fuel, is on track to double worldwide between 2023 and 2030.



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-Millions of people are working in politics and in communities to make these shifts faster, and make the Earth safer and more fair for everyone.

It's thanks to the work of climate activists, including many young people your age, that the U.S. passed the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022.

The IRA is the largest investment in clean energy in our nation's history. This law alone is expected to reduce U.S. carbon pollution 40 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. And, it reserves \$60 billion for Black, Brown, poor, and other communities that have been disproportionately affected by pollution in the past. And it includes historic investments in rural communities as well.

-Working in science and engineering to develop new technologies that produce less pollution and waste and restore natural systems.

-Working in education and mental health to raise awareness of climate change, the solutions, and to help people feel empowered to contribute to making a difference.



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The road ahead is hard, but we have made a huge amount of progress in the past few years.

"Thanks to astonishing declines in the price of renewables, a truly global political mobilization, a clearer picture of the energy future and serious policy focus from world leaders, we have cut expected warming almost in half in just five years." New York Times reporter David Wallace-Wells wrote in 2022.





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Questions:

What actions do you see people taking around you in response to climate change?

What changes are you interested in making?

What solutions do you want to learn more about?



4. Climate emotions are real and valid.

As we've been talking about this, you've probably realized climate change isn't just a set of facts. It usually comes with feelings.

Young people are especially concerned. In one big survey, across 10 countries, more than half of young people reported feeling each of the following emotions: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty.

And that makes sense, because the effects of climate change are expected to get worse than they are today, at least for a little while, even as many people do everything we can to fix it.



All of these feelings are valid and rooted in reality, and you are not alone.

Finding ways to work with climate feelings, usually with support from friends, family, and community, can help us be more resilient in the face of this challenge.

And when we do this kind of work, we might experience other climate emotions too: like gratitude, connection, joy, empathy, curiosity, and motivation.

Questions: What emotions does climate change bring up for you?

5. Coping with climate emotions is important. This includes self-care and acting to be part of the solution.

There are three big ways that we learn to cope with big climate feelings. And they are all important.



We can do something to help express our feelings: Write in a journal, play music that matches our mood and dance it out, talk to a friend, family member or a therapist about how we feel.

We can do things that calm us, lift our mood and bring us joy: Take deep breaths. Meditate. Spend time in nature. Move our bodies. Snuggle with a pet. Watch a funny video. Do something with our hands like crafting or cooking.

And, what's just as important specifically for climate feelings, is that we can act to make things better. Take personal action, like composting your food, picking a plant-based diet, growing food (home or community garden), cycling instead of driving, or choosing used clothes. And take collective action, like talking to people in your school or community about climate change, joining an organization, attending a protest, calling your elected official, writing a letter, posting on social media, planting trees in your area, raising money for an organization.



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Sources:

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<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/for-educators/>

Action Options for Students

<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/campaign/green-new-deal-for-schools/>

<https://www.takeactionglobal.org/>

<https://ourclimate.us>

[CMHN Taking Action & Self Care Worksheets](#)

Action Options for Parents

<https://www.thisisplaneted.org/img/K12-Parent-Climate-Advocacy-Toolkit.pdf>

<https://www.mothersoutfront.org/>

<https://www.momscleanairforce.org/>