CLIMATE

STAFF & VOLUNTEER TIPSHEET

How to use this document

This tipsheet offers strategies and tools for youth development professionals who are planning and facilitating programming around climate. It includes helpful frameworks and key terms, science-backed approaches for teaching different age groups, and tools for working with the emotions that climate discussions can bring up.

Key Terms

- **Atmosphere** - the envelope of air that surrounds the Earth
- **Biosphere** - the regions of the Earth's surface and atmosphere where life exists
- **Climate** - the long-term pattern of weather in a particular area over 30 or more years
- **Climate change** - a long-term shift in the Earth's temperature and weather patterns, caused primarily by human activities that increase the ratio of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere
- **Climate responses**:
  - **Adaptation** - changing our behaviors, systems, and ways of life to adjust to a shifting climate
  - **Mitigation** - actions that reduce the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere
  - **Resilience** - the ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from climate impacts
- **Climate science** - the scientific study of Earth's climate
- **Environment** - all the living and nonliving elements in a particular place
- **Environmental justice** - the movement against unequal distribution of environmental contaminants that affect communities of color both within the United States and internationally
- **Greenhouse gasses** - gasses such as carbon dioxide that trap heat within the atmosphere, contributing to climate change
- **Place-based learning** - an approach to teaching that immerses students in local histories, environments, and experiences
- **Science literacy** - the ability to understand and accurately interpret scientific knowledge
- **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)** - the evolving knowledge acquired by Indigenous and local people over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment
- **Weather** - the state of the air and atmosphere at a particular time and place (rainy, cloudy, sunny, snowy, windy, cold, hot...)

Climate Education for Different Ages and Stages

We can adapt how we talk about climate depending on the age and developmental stage of our participants. Here are the educational goals recommended for different ages and stages, as well as some sample language that can reduce overwhelm and encourage a sense of agency among your learners.

Ages 1 – 5

Educational goals:

- Inspire wonder for nature
- Recognize small acts of respect for the planet
- Focus on local efforts and actions
- Keep faith in humanity alive

Helpful messages:

- "The planet is our home, so we have to take care of it so that it'sa safe place to live."
- "Climate change is a big problem, and there's a lot of people working together to solve it."

Ages 6 – 11

Educational goals:

- Explain the science in simple terms
- Learn about naming feelings and practicing emotional resilience
- Focus on the power of personal action

Helpful messages:

- "People make pollution that goes into the air and can act like a blanket. The blanket heats up our planet, which causes problems."
- "What have you been hearing about climate change? Do your friends talk about it?
- "Would you be interested in getting involved? We can explore options together."
- "What kinds of emotions come up for you? Can you name them? Can I share some things I do when I feel that way?"

Ages 12 – 14

Educational goals:

- Encourage questions
- Engage their strengths and interests in expressing concerns
- Connect to local/recent events

Helpful messages:

- "I know this is big and overwhelming, but I also really believe there's so much we can do to rise to the challenge and make a difference."
- "I don't have all the answers, and I'm learning about this the same as you are, but I know it's important that we keep talking, and I'm open to whatever you're feeling or thinking."

Ages 15 – 18

Educational goals:

- Invite them to educate you
- Share stories of teens making a difference
- Encourage them to take action
- Discuss coping strategies
- Be a role model

Helpful messages:

- "How can I support you?"
- "Do you want help learning more, or help getting involved, or just having me be a person you can share your feelings with and know I won't judge you or try to fix it?"

Remember that these goals and messages are just guidelines, so you can be flexible with which ones you use and how. Regardless of age, it is important to authentically connect with young people and validate their feelings and experiences, letting them know they are not alone.

Navigating Controversy

Climate change can be a controversial issue. Some people have been exposed to misinformation about it from the media, and some communities have had negative historical experiences with scientists and experts. Since climate affects all of us, people are passionate about the subject. **We encourage you to approach climate discussions as opportunities to develop key skills in science literacy, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue.** Here are some **strategies** you can use to navigate controversy:

Facilitating Challenging Conversations:

- While not every perspective on climate is correct, foster an environment where every voice belongs.
- Model and encourage humility, curiosity, openness to questions, and a willingness to explore.
- Notice and address dismissiveness, attempts to shut down dialog, judgmental attitudes, and/or shame and blame.
- Avoid advocating for political candidates or parties; instead, focus on broader policy recommendations.

Diffusing Conflict:

- Listen fully to each person's concerns or questions.
- Ask open-ended, genuine, clarifying questions to understand their perspective.
- Reflect what you hear back to them.
- Acknowledge the value of that person's point of view so that each person feels heard.
- Share knowledge in ways that address their concerns.

Fostering Agreement:

- Appreciate where people are coming from, their intelligence, and their values.
- Frame your argument to match your audience's values.
- Be factual and ensure that your sources are accurate.
- Use stories to bring a personal angle.
- Allow people to "save face." Validate that the misinformation seems logical while sharing scientific knowledge.
- Offer a path forward.
- Look for common ground (facts, values, etc.) and leverage areas of easy agreement.

Visit the CLEAN website (cleanet.org/clean/literacy/tools/controversy.html) for more information on navigating climate controversy!

CLIMATE RESOURCES

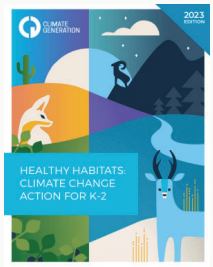
YOUTH RESOURCES

These resources have been recommended through the Curriculum Jams process for supporting youth participants.

Healthy Habitats: Climate Change Action for K-2

Topics include ecosystems, climate change, climate impacts on habitats, and climate actions.

https://climategen.org/resources/43007/healthy-habitats-climate-change-action-for-k2/



Food Solutions: Climate Change Action for K-2

Topics include local food systems and sustainability, weather vs. climate, air pollution, and activism.

https://climategen.org/resources/48160/food-solutions-climate-change-action-for-k-2/

Tackling Climate Change through Environmental Justice

Topics include systemic inequalities, environmental justice frameworks and heroes, local issues, youth citizen engagement, and perspective-taking.

https://www.ecorise.org/clean-ej/

Young Ambassadors for the Birds in the Face of Climate Change

Topics include climate change impacts on bird habitats, migration, and adaptation.

https://swibirds.org/climate-change-curricula

Plum Landing

A website with lessons on topics including urban and rural habitats and species, heat island effect, watersheds, and biodiversity.

https://pbskids.org/plumlanding/educators/pathways/afterschool activities/

Conclusion

Talking about climate change can be challenging, but addressing this topic skillfully can help youth build more emotional resilience and prepare for climate events to come.

Discussing climate can also help young people identify what they can do to take action, channel their feelings into positive change, and see their place in the bigger picture.

ABOUT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

This information was developed through UW-Madison Extension's Curriculum Jams process. Curriculum Jams bring together people with lived experience to review and recommend learning resources.

Check out our website to learn more!
youthdevelopment.extension.wisc.edu/curriculum-jams

REFERENCES:

https://www.nrdc.org/stories/your-guide-talking-kids-all-ages-about-climate-change

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/all-around/Pages/Talking-with-Children-about-Climate-Change.aspx#:~:text=School%2Dage%20Children%20

https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-talk-to-children-about-climate-change/