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'The Talk': how to tell your 8-year-old about climate change

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When Ian Kim imagines the world his 7-year-old daughter will be living in 20 years from now, he says it keeps him up at night. Images of ever more frequent super storms like Sandy, along with rising seas, or drought and heat waves wreaking havoc with crops haunt his waking hours.

?It?s a huge worry for me,? said Kim, a self-described environmental and social justice activist. ?On a scale of one to 10, it?s a 10.?

It?s a sentiment likely shared by parents the world over, though it?s especially pronounced among those working close to the issue. Kim described climate change as ?a slow motion disaster that is already happening right now.?

Studies suggest that a mere uptick of a few degrees in temperature would lead to catastrophe on a global scale. The world witnessed yet another milestone when the level of greenhouse gases that drive global warming recently reached 400 ppm [1], a benchmark that the *New York Times* noted [2] was pushing the world closer to ?a point of no return ? when vast, disruptive climate change is baked into our future.?

As a parent, Kim is grappling with how to prepare his daughter, Minju, who turns 8 next month, for a much harsher future.

?I think there?s a larger conversation to have with her about ? the very challenging future that we?re hurtling towards,? he said, adding that he wanted to do more research before broaching the topic with her to avoid presenting ?an overblown doomsday scenario.?

He?s not alone. For environmental activists who, like Kim, are raising children, the turning point toward concerted action comes when work takes on a personal urgency. Kim recently left a post working on Van Jones? Rebuild the Dream [3] campaign, which focused in part on creating an economy beneficial to both young people and the environment.

Lisa Hoyos, an environmental advocate who has worked on labor and environmental issues for more than two decades, believes parents are an important voice in addressing climate change. She co-founded Climate Parents [4], an Oakland-based organization that seeks to mobilize parents on the issue.

?Climate change is such a major threat to the future of my kids and everyone?s kids,? said Hoyos, who has a 4- and a 7-year-old. ?Parents more than any other group [have a] deep vested interest in our future, [because] the people we love most are in danger.?

Hoyos, who directs the Blue Green Alliance, is on partial leave to further develop Climate Parents through a citizen-engagement project accelerator program. She co-founded the group in the summer of 2012 with

journalist and author Mark Hertsgaard, who wrote ?Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth.? Its board includes Kim, Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune and author Annie Leonard.

Since its founding, Climate Parents has signed on 3,000 members. One of its first campaigns was to elevate the issue of climate change among the presidential candidates.

Hoyos says her 7-year-old, Kai, is already aware of climate change.

?It comes from me. It comes from school. Exposure they get to the media ? all the coverage [of Super storm] Sandy or drought,? she said. ?Kids ask questions if they hear things in the news ? sometimes kids are afraid. ?All the fires, are they going to come here???

Hoyos says that when children encounter problems, they are very interested in ?understanding solutions.? Learning about solar panels from his father, who works for a solar firm, Hoyos recalled her son asking, ?Why don?t we have more of it. How do we get more of it??

Those questions lead to a conversation about how change happens in society, pointing to examples from history such as the civil rights movement, during which people marched, wrote letters and stood up.

?It?s a similar fight here,? Hoyos said. ?Powerful forces [are working] to keep things how they are even though it's hurting our planet, our air and our health.?

Journalist Lisa Bennett, who is writing a book about climate change and parents, said the most important conversation parents can have with their kids about climate change is ?one in which they talk and we listen.?

?I think that children can be our guides on this topic. They can help us know how much they are ready to know and when,? she said, adding that she would refrain from having ?the talk? with kids younger than 8 years old.

?[Climate change] is a topic that causes people ? kids and grownups alike ? a lot of fear ? but when we?re talking about children we don?t want to instill fear,? she said. ?Our kids didn?t create this problem, so they shouldn?t be made to feel they are responsible for fixing it when they are still children.?

Based on numerous interviews with parents, researchers and psychologists, Bennett, who is the mother of two boys, ages 9 and 13, said it is most important for young children to ?just have a chance to experience nature and be kids ? have a chance to fall in love with it.?

?[That should] absolutely not be taken away by serving up too much too soon,? she said.

Bennett agrees that parents play a critical role in responding to climate change, but she said it?s not enough to limit climate action to the home sphere. Groups like Hoyos? help to connect parents to the public sphere, where they can influence policymakers.

For Kim, the parent grappling with how to talk to his daughter about climate change, those conversations are the foundation for breeding leadership.

?I think what really matters [is to ask], Is there resilience in our communities to the changes that are coming? Is there leadership in our community ? to help people come together and point toward a solution and not be divisive??

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