



Talking with kids about climate change

By Diane Williamson

Like many parents, I assumed that it would be difficult to talk with my children about global warming. Of course, I did not want to traumatize them. Actually, our talk had the opposite effect: When I found the right way to explain the science, my son (age 6) and I became more confident in our society's ability to address this problem.

Although global warming has come up in conversation a number of different times, by far the most effective way for our family to cover the subject proved to be with "The Magic School Bus book: The Climate Challenge." "The Magic School Bus and The Electric Field Trip" is also good for background information. We love Magic School Bus books and the TV show. The original books are packed with information and I find that even I learn something from each new book we read.

Now that our kids are headed back to school, we are reminded of our role as educators. A visit to the library or the MOST reminds us of many simple science concepts that we need to be reinforcing at home, like the idea that tree leaves make the oxygen we breathe a waste product — "We breathe tree poop?!" — our cars and coal burning power plants make carbon dioxide, and carbon dioxide is a heat-trapping gas.

Bill Nye the Science Guy — our kids' Mister Wizard, if you remember that show — made a great short video for YouTube with a simple experiment to demonstrate this property of CO₂. He sets up two glass jars: one with plain air and one with a tube to pump CO₂ in. There is a thermometer in each jar and a large lamp. The temperature in the CO₂ jar goes up faster and stays higher.

My son recently had an "Aha" moment when reading

"The Climate Challenge." We had already read "The Electric Field Trip" and also visited a science museum where kids could spin magnets (with a hand pump) to generate electricity, so he knew already that this is the way that power plants work. After reading about some of the effects of global warming (melting ice, rising sea levels, hurricanes, droughts and floods — the book does a good job of explaining these paradoxical extremes), the book again discusses electricity generation. We blow the top off a mountain, dig up the coal, ship it across the country, burn it, make steam and spin those magnets. He looked up at me with incredibly appropriate consternation: "Do you mean that all you have to do is spin the magnets?"

Once you understand the basics, the technology gets fun, and now my son asks all kinds of questions about electric cars, wind mills, green

buildings, etc. Kids care about climate change. After all, it's their future and they lack any guilty feelings that prompt defensiveness and denial. Even more so, they care about the solutions.

Since average global temperatures have already risen and Arctic Sea ice is already melting away, children are going to hear about global warming sooner or later. As a parent, you can model scientific curiosity, compassion for others, and the willingness to face the challenge head on. After all, when the going gets tough, if the tough aren't out there designing super-efficient solar panels, they usually at least know what's going on.

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