

# Raising Rippers

## Having Kids Won't Hurt the Planet If We Teach Them How to Save It

*There's a growing movement of people who say that abstaining from having children is the best way to offset climate change. They're wrong. The only way to stop it is by raising environmentally conscientious kids.*

By: Katie Arnold    Sep 29, 2016



Kids can learn to save the planet, too. Photo: Caia Images/Aurora

A few weeks ago, we were driving home from a family camping trip in southern Colorado, when an NPR story (<http://www.npr.org/2016/08/28/491726848/activists-consider-the-climate-impact-of-having-children>) came on the radio about couples choosing not to have babies because of the mounting perils of climate change. The gist of the anti-child camp: more people equals more carbon emissions.

This was definitely one of those moments when you sneak a peek in the rearview mirror to see if little ears are listening. They were. “Mama, what are they talking about?” my eight-year-old asked, perking up when she saw me hesitate. Kids her age are like mountain lions stalking their prey, ready to pounce at the first sign of uncertainty.

“We-ell,” I said, stalling for time. “People are afraid the climate is changing so quickly that they aren’t sure if it’s a good idea to have babies.”

Pippa furrowed her brow. “Those babies—they’re like a different generation than me, though, right?” she asked hopefully. To an eight-year-old, eight years is, well, a lifetime.

“Climate change is starting to affect all of us now,” Steve, my husband, cut in.

I cringed a little; there were so many ways this could go. But then Pippa’s face brightened. “Well, what can we do?”

Like roughly 120 million people in the U.S., my husband and I have already made the choice to bring children into a world of a rapidly changing climate. Fourteen of the past 15 years have been the hottest on record, and according to a 2016 study from the National Academies Press it’s become easier for scientists to directly attribute extreme weather events such as tropical cyclones, droughts, fire cycles, and flooding to human-caused climate change. Scientists warn that more than a two-degree Celsius rise in global average temperatures will cause irreversible and catastrophic damage (<http://www.wri.org/ipcc-infographics>) to the climate, affecting food security, groundwater, and sea levels. And even while the news is seriously grim—can’t-think-about-it-before-bed-or-else-I-won’t-be-able-to-go-to-sleep grim—with all due respect to those who have decided to remain childless, I choose to see our family of four not as a problem but as part of the solution.

But Pippa’s right. We have to act.

“As families, we are economic and political actors and we need to leverage our influence,” says Lisa Hoyos, director and co-founder of the advocacy group Climate Parents,

which recently joined forces with the Sierra Club (<http://www.climateparents.org>). “Parents are hardwired to protect kids on every issue, including bullying in school and gun violence. Climate change is the biggest global threat our children face in their lifetimes, and solutions are right here at hand.”

As we drove south into New Mexico, Steve and I rattled off the list of steps that we take as a family on a daily basis: recycle, turn off lights when we leave the room, power down devices overnight once they’re fully charged, switch to LED lightbulbs, ride your bike or walk to school, carpool to soccer practice. Consume less. Be happy with all that we have. To jaded adults, these are so small and seemingly trivial—the proverbial drop in the bucket — that some days it’s hard to fathom how they could possibly make a difference without major federal policy changes.

But kids view problems differently. “They have big hearts, they really want to help, and they don’t see limits,” says Barbara Ann Richman, executive director of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes (<http://barronprize.org/>), which honors 25 young change-makers every year. “The best way to inspire our children to action is to model the behavior we want. Be explicit by saying, ‘I’m going to turn off the light before I leave the room to save energy,’ or ‘Why don’t we ride bikes?’”

The next step is to scale up to clean-energy alternatives like wind and solar. “Clean energy is cheaper than fossil fuels in many places,” says Hoyos, who notes that solar lease programs and community choice aggregation programs have made clean energy more affordable and accessible. In some cities, community solar “gardens” installed a large rooftop provide energy for multiple households at once.

“Parents really need to think about energy that powers our homes in the same way we think about the food we feed our children,” Hoyos says. “We’ve made huge shifts in the questions we ask: is it local, is it pesticide-free, does it have a huge carbon footprint, is it seasonal? We need to do the same with our utilities. Is our energy coming from sources that are going to give children asthma and put them at risk of droughts, fires, and extreme weather? When we begin to feel empowered to tell our energy providers that we want clean, healthy energy for our kids, we will see a change.”

This isn't just a job for grownups. Kids can take action, too, says Hoyos, by organizing at their schools to make sure they're powered by clean energy, rallying student leaders to create school gardens, pushing for city-wide bike lanes, and lobbying their mayors to pass clean-energy initiatives, like the Sierra Club's 100 "Ready for 100%" campaign in which cities pledge to obtain all of their energy from renewable sources by 2035. San Diego was the one of the first U.S. cities to join the program. Salt Lake City set a 100 percent clean energy goal for 2032.

Children's voices matter, says Delaney Reynolds, a 17-year-old from Miami Beach who was one of 15 winners of this year's Barron Prize. Reynolds first became concerned about rising sea levels as a third-grader. She went on to self-publish three children's ecology books by the time she was in middle school and recently finished her fourth, about climate change. These days she works "pretty much 24/7" on her sustainable initiative, Sink or Swim (<http://miamisearise.com/>), which draws attention to the threat of sea level changes in low-lying areas like Miami and the Keys. "I attended the mayor of Miami's second budget meeting and asked him to allocate \$1 million to climate change," recalls Delaney. "He laughed at me, but I wanted to make my point. He finally increased the budget to \$300,000 and created first chief sustainability officer."

Of course kids can't go it alone. "The biggest thing is that we have a relatively short window to effect these solutions," says Hoyos, "and given the urgency, kids need to work with adults and show up and use their moral authority."

Parents, too, need to step up. "We have to empower our children to use their voices and show them we're with them," says Richman. This means both logistical help—carpooling to city council meetings and advice on drafting letters—and moral support. "It's our job to encourage them to recognize the heroic qualities that everyone possesses," she says. Mealtime conversations are a natural starting point. During their family dinners,

Richman and her three kids, ages 6, 6, and ten, pull words like “compassion,” “courage,” “perseverance,” and “hope,” from a jar and then take turns naming the parts of their day when they or someone they saw acted from those values.

Books, too, make a lasting impact on young minds. “Biographies about people in history who have come before show us what it looks like to be the author of your own story, to follow your calling and pursue it in a way that benefits other people and the planet,” says Richman (Download [http://tabarron.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/YHBibliography\\_2015.pdf](http://tabarron.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/YHBibliography_2015.pdf) for a list of stellar nonfiction and fiction books that fit the bill.)

I asked Delaney what advice she has for an eager eight-year-old (mine was practically hanging on the phone, gesturing frantically to a list she’d made of her own climate-change activism: “My elementary school just installed solar panels, and me and my best friend have a recycling club. We’re trying to get each class to have a director.”) “Use your voice,” said Delaney. “If you’re too shy to approach political figures, you can write letters. As you get older, talk to adults, use your passion to your advantage and to inspire people. If you show the world that kids understand carbon dioxide going into planet is unhealthy, you can accomplish great things.”