

Raising Children to a Climate Change Future

By Joanne Poyourow

We educate our children in the ways of society—arithmetic, literature, scientific understanding, history. We worry college entry and potential careers. Our environmental coursework might go so far as to warn of looming environmental disasters. We might encourage recycling or participate in community cleanups. Perhaps your family contributes to wildlife funds or charities which save the rainforests.

But with global warming, sea level rise, environmental degradation, and related social and economic upheaval, the future our children face will be dramatically different from life as we now know it. Are we truly preparing our children for their future?

I spent more than five years exploring the recommendations of scientists and deep environmental thinkers. I wanted to know how the next 40 years might unfold—my children's journey to adulthood. I wanted to understand the issues, but even moreso, I wanted to learn about their solutions.

What I learned was that preparing our children for their environmental future goes far beyond recycling a bottle and Save the Whales.

Think about your fifth grade science lessons, when you learned that the planet is made up of cycles: the carbon cycle, the water cycle. Evaporation over the ocean forms clouds, which bring precipitation to the land. Water flows down rivers and through groundwater pockets and returns to the ocean. The cycle continues. It is self-sustaining. It is Sustainable.

We depend upon the cycles of this planet to give ourselves and our children physical nourishment. But the way our society currently operates is far from these sustainable cycles. We're depleting the world fisheries, polluting rivers with agricultural runoff, hitting capacity on our landfills, altering the atmosphere with our carbon emissions.

But things are looking greener. Over the time I've been studying these issues, the selection of organic products in my local market has expanded. The number of car buyers switching to more-fuel-efficient Priuses has dramatically increased.

The National Council of Churches promotes Eco-Justice programs. California Interfaith Power and Light is campaigning to reduce global warming. Environmental issues now appear regularly in major newspapers. The transformation of society is underway.

How can we prepare our children to grow up in this world of massive change? What concepts should we emphasize, what skills should we teach?

I offer many tips on my www.LegacyLA.net website. The following are particularly appropriate:

5 Ways You Can Prepare Your Children for a Climate Change Future:

1. Adjust expectations. Remember that water cycle? Natural cycles are circular; eventually all things return to the source. Think now of the upward linear expectations of a Wall Street stock report. Hmm, it doesn't quite match. Our societal expectations of ever-increasing wealth, of infinite accumulation of assets, are out of sync with the realities of natural resources.

We need to adjust our expectations. Our economic expectations, that our children will earn more and have bigger houses than we do. Our energy expectations, that society can continue to increase our appetite for fossil fuels. We need to adjust our picture of the future: striving toward George Jetson or Star Trek is an outmoded vision.

Rather, it is time to adjust to Donella Meadows' idea of Sufficiency: "There is just enough of everything for everyone and not one bit more." (The Global Citizen by Donella Meadows, Island Press, 1991) continued

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2. Understand the shift. Einstein once said: “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Solving our environmental issues requires new ways of thinking—a reevaluation of previous goals, dreams, visions for society's future—a paradigm shift.

We're used to evaluating potential purchases on whether item A or item B costs less dollars. Now the cost we must compare is the impact on the earth's resources: the raw materials consumed in manufacture; the fossil fuels and corresponding greenhouse gas emissions of transporting the item from another continent; the landfill impact of the packaging; and whether we really need the item in the first place.

3. Surround 'em with it. Our children are familiar with the lifestyle in which they are raised. If they grow up surrounded by guzzling SUV's, and consumerist discount stores, these will be their subconscious standard for “normal.” If the Girl Scout craft is made from never-degradable sponge foam, and the family meal appears on disposable plates, these create a warped sense of “acceptable.”

But if the church banquet is served on real reuseable plates, the kids bus their table scraps into a composter, the paper on which they do their lessons is 100% recycled (and the T.P. is too!), their growing sense of normal is much more in line with their future.

4. Be an Example. Some of the skills which will be required in a sustainable future are skills we've lost touch with as a society. In the past two generations of consumerism and outsourcing, we've forgotten how to plant a vegetable garden to feed our families. We've lost touch with our ability to heal minor illnesses at home.

Can you sew? Learn, and let your children see you growing and adjusting. Try new recipes, made from backyard vegetables, and encourage your kids to harvest, clean produce, and cook at your side. Reconsider your parental habits of intricate and travel-intensive scheduling. Opt for kid activities within biking or walking distance. Together, explore local foods at your neighborhood farmers' market. Make it an annual family tradition to plant a tree.

No, we cannot transform overnight. Regard it as a long-term plan, of skill acquisition and habit reform. You've begun the journey into a very real future.

5. Cultivate a Peer Group. Being green gets easier when you're doing it with supportive friends. Parents can swap resources and ideas. For our growing kids, it's easier when their friends compare functional knitting and woodcrafts, rather than consumer electronics with planned obsolescence or fashions fleeting on corporate whim.

Every time you take a greener step, you model earth-wiser behavior for others. You make it safer for others to try these new ideas. They gain confidence from your example, they try it, and your greening efforts are suddenly compounded!

So cultivate a circle of like-minded people. Cheer each others' earth-wiser achievements. Make it fun and cool to be green.

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“10 Things You Can Do About Global Warming (Yes, even if you're not yet an adult)” a free booklet for children (grades 4-8 reading level) is available free via www.LegacyLA.net/articles.htm

Get the Environmental Change-Makers' “Children's Environmental Booklist” free at www.envirochangemakers.org/pdfs/ChildrBooklist.pdf

Understand the shift yourself, so you can guide your children ... *Legacy: A Story of Hope for a Time of Environmental Crisis* presents real environmental science in a tender story of grassroots heroes. Experience this positive vision of how the next 40 years could unfold. Technologies change, values shift, as characters the age of today's young children grow into adulthood. *Legacy* illustrates the transformation of society toward a greener, more Sustainable future.

Joanne Poyourow is a passionate organic gardener, a writer, and a community-builder. She leads a group of Environmental Change-Makers in the Westchester area of Los Angeles. A mother of two young children, she encourages us to better the environmental Legacy we are leaving to future generations.