



Supporting Young People's Activism in the Climate Emergency

Key takeaways

- Young people* are powerful agents of social change. Most revolutions have been led by young people.
- Young people need accurate information about the reality of the climate crisis. They need our support to remember that they are powerful and can take action to stop climate change. Young people need us to be confident in them.
- Adults need to support the young people who are taking action. Adults can be most supportive when they can both feel proud of the work they have done as adults and support young people to try everything they want to try.

Backing Young People in Fighting the Climate Emergency

Young people are powerful agents of social change. They are playing vital roles in the climate movement. They have the power to make change. Backing young people to take action is among the most important work adults can do. Young people are a frontline community with regard to climate change—many young people, world-wide, are already living through

the challenges of the climate crisis and will face it throughout their lives.

Adults can be effective allies to young activists by supporting them in what they need and ask for. They can counter the oppressive messages that young people are not fully intelligent or capable until they “grow up.” Unchallenged, young people’s oppression leaves many of them with the incorrect idea that they are not smart or powerful. Adults can stand against this oppression. They can encourage young people to think and take action. They can take young people’s leadership seriously.

It is particularly important that adults don’t “pass on” to young people the discouragement and fears we have accumulated over time. We want young people to be free to try every action they can think. They should not have to listen to our worries or our “improvements” to their ideas.

Adults can best support young people when we build real, personal relationships with them. That means reaching out to young people of every background. It means challenging the oppressive system that keep us divided. It means challenging racism, classism, sexism, and more. Young people need support when they hear hard information, when they are going through hard

* We refer to people age 21 and under as young people.



times, when they are facing a big challenge, or when they feel like giving up.

Communicating with Young People about Climate Change

Young people are fully intelligent. They are capable of understanding complex ideas. It is essential that we communicate directly and honestly with them. We also get to figure out how to talk about climate change while laughing and having fun—two things that young people are especially good at.

We need to talk to young people about the realities of climate change and its consequences.

It may be scary to do this, but we can't hide this important information from them. They are going to be alive and living with the climate emergency for many more years. Almost all young people understand that things need to change and that it is important to take action against injustice.

When talking to groups, particularly groups of young people, it is helpful to do the following:

- Ask people to pair up and take turns exploring any feelings about the topic—for example, feelings of grief, fear, and numbness
- Ask them lots of questions about what they think



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism* (UER) is a group of people of all ages and backgrounds, in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from the emotional scars of oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging emotional release, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



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- Really listen to what they say
- Express appreciation; ask members of the group to appreciate each other

It is important to understand that climate change can be stopped. Hundreds of thousands of people, many of them young people, are taking action every day throughout the world. Make sure that young people have access to information about youth activism and international movements of young people—the Sunrise movement, the Extinction Rebellion, the youth climate strikes, and more. Show videos of these young people doing powerful things; these stories inspire others to act.

As adults, we sometimes try to fix or take care of everything. We often tell young people what to do. We lecture them, express our doubts, and discourage them from taking certain actions. Though understandable, this is generally not helpful. There isn't time to get everything perfect—and it's not necessary. We need to try everything we can think of, apologize for mistakes, and keep trying. Young people appreciate that.

Defending Young People Against Criticism Based on Their Age

Whenever young people dare to be powerful and speak out, there will be adults who try to shut them down. The following statements (among others) are often used to discredit their efforts:

- “Adults already told you what to say and do! So do that!”
- “You don't have the facts right; you don't know how it works!”
- “You're being rude and angry; this isn't how to make change!”

We need to recognize others' attempts to discredit young people's efforts, or when we ourselves discredit them. Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish climate activist, said, “The rules are not working, so it's time to change the rules.” Young people often know how to break rules and agitate for change.

We can do the following when an adult attempts to discredit young people or attack their efforts:

- **LISTEN** Ask the young people how they feel after they have taken action—and listen!
- **APPRECIATE** them and remind them that they did great work.
- **ENGAGE** with the adult who criticized the action; tell them why you support the young people and their work.

We need to radically transform society in order to combat climate change—and this will take all of us. All of our skills and talents are needed. Adults and young people can act as a united front.

People often don't organize until things are desperate—and they are desperate now. Young people understand that. When they are cared about, given accurate information, and supported—they act.





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—and some very large changes in our economy and the lives we live are needed for this to happen. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis cannot be resolved without ending racism, genocide toward Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on people targeted by these particular oppressions. Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of both climate change and racism.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings of discouragement and powerlessness, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the escalating damage to the earth's climate, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional damage done to humans is the result of this passing on of hurt. Though humans are vulnerable to acting in oppressive ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a human has been

hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal damage

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency. People would not cooperate with a society that exploits people and damages the environment if they had not first been hurt.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other damaging behavior is not quick or easy work. Many of us resist this work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the damage done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this damage.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing. By releasing distressed feelings in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



Sustaining All Life



For more information, see:

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