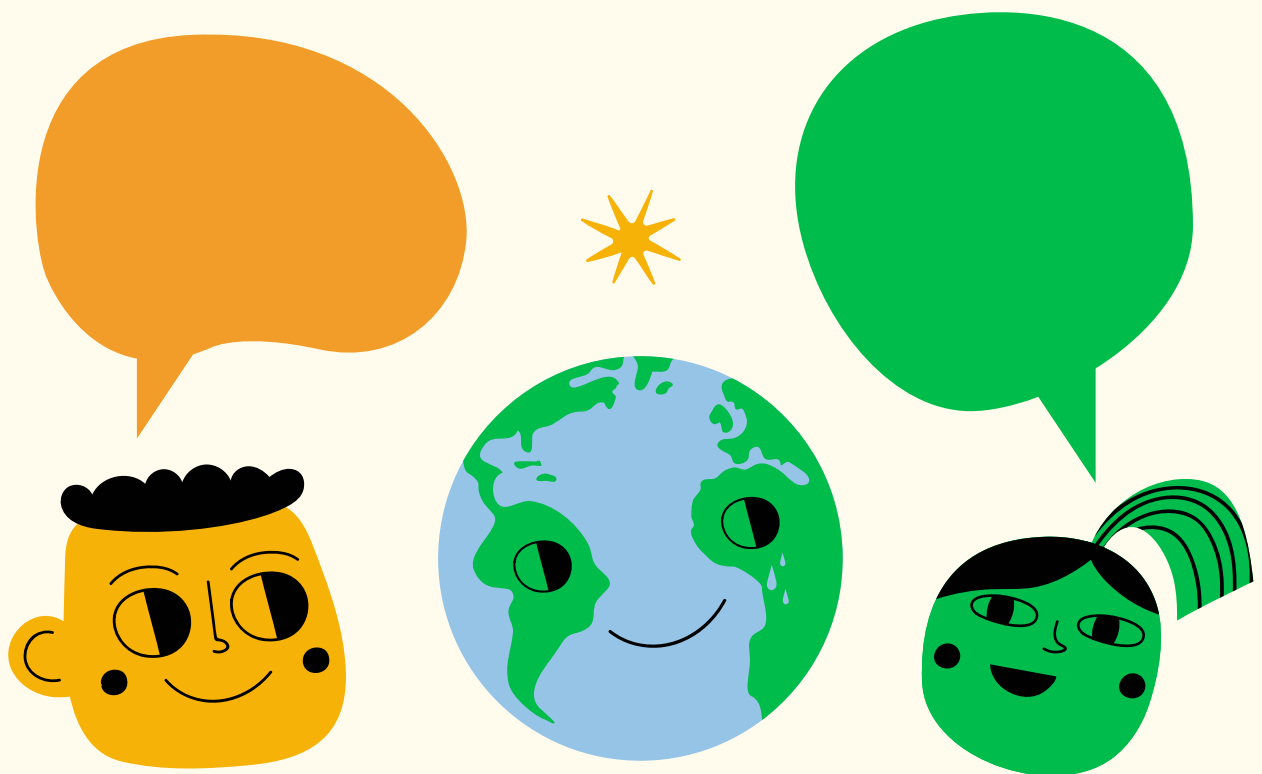


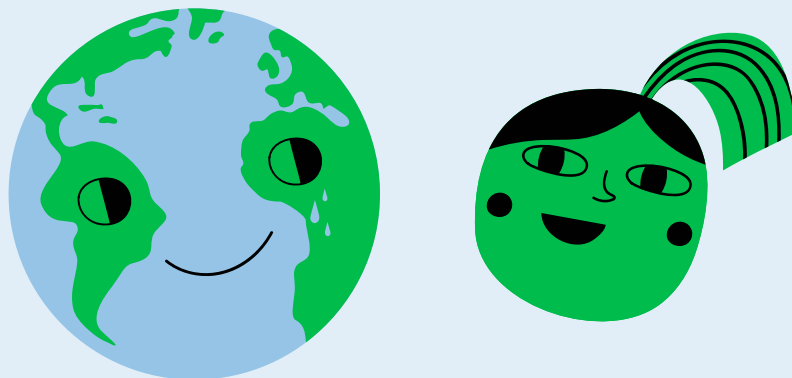
How to speak with your family and friends about environmental issues



Introduction

We are currently facing a wide range of enormous environmental crises, including biodiversity loss and climate change. Human activities are driving many of these problems and it is normal to feel hopeless.

However, our actions at both individual and policy-levels can help address these challenges—and one of the most powerful, yet underappreciated, ways we can take action is by engaging our social networks in dialogue.



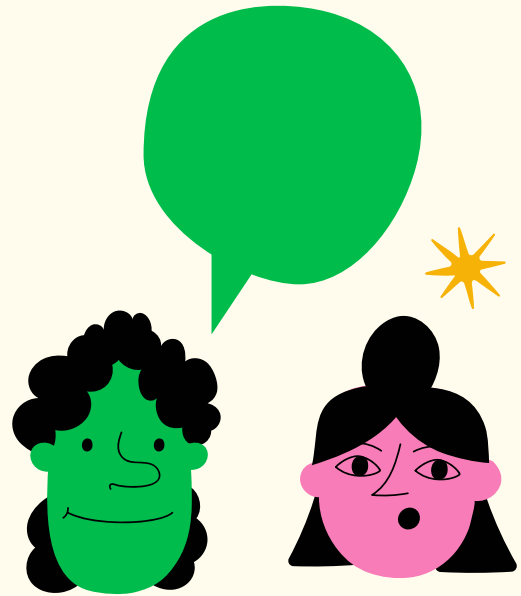
Why should you engage your social network about environmental action?

Think of your social network as your conservation superpower. We all have friends and family who trust us and our opinions. If you can encourage just one other person to change their behavior, this can double your environmental impact. Furthermore, we need to create more safe spaces to reflect upon the massive changes happening across our planet and empower more diverse voices to join the environmental movement.

Who is this guide for?

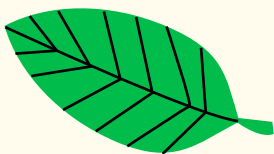
This guide is for anyone who:

- Cares deeply about environmental issues and would like to effectively engage their family and friends about these tough topics
- Wants to help catalyze environmental action
- Feels intimidated to raise environmental issues in interpersonal conversations



Is it ethical?¹

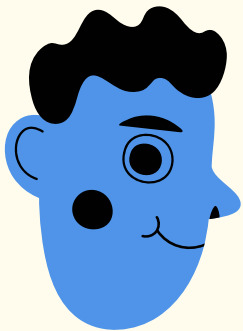
We try to persuade our friends and family to see things our way all the time. We argue for doing things a certain way at work, we advocate for eating at our favorite restaurant, we support our local sports team. If we're willing to take a stance on matters like that, why not the future of our planet? By encouraging others to take action, you're not coercing or forcing them — you're setting a good example and aligning your behavior with your values. Furthermore, environmental discussions are not only about persuasion; conversations create opportunities for individuals to consider their personal stances on environmental issues, process their emotions and reflect on what sorts of actions they may be willing to pursue.



Who are the authors?

We are environmental social scientists, drawing on our research and combined experience of campaigning for change.

General advice



Start with listening

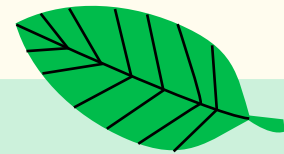
Start conversations by asking your conversation partner(s) open-ended questions related to environmental issues. For instance, have they perceived changes in their local weather? Have they read about biodiversity loss or climate change in the news recently? What do they think about renewable energy technologies?

Focus on high-impact behaviors

It's important that individuals pursue environmental solutions that make the most sense to them and align with their personal circumstances. At the same time, in conversations you can try to encourage your family and friends to consider high-impact behaviors, such as shifting to a plant-based diet, flying and driving less, and becoming activists. Spend less time advocating for low-impact behaviors, like single-use plastic straws and recycling, although these actions should certainly not be discouraged.

You don't need to be an expert

Environmental issues can be very complex. Keep in mind that you don't need to be an expert to start a conversation. It's completely fine to say "I don't know too much about this but let's look it up!". However you can prepare yourself for discussions using some of the resources listed here.



There are several resources you can consult to increase your knowledge about certain conservation- and climate-friendly activities and become more comfortable in talking about them:

- Carbon Brief
- The Royal Society
- NASA
- Harvard University's Centre for Climate, Health and Global Environment
- The Society for Conservation Biology
- The International Union for Conservation of Nature

Don't be afraid to try



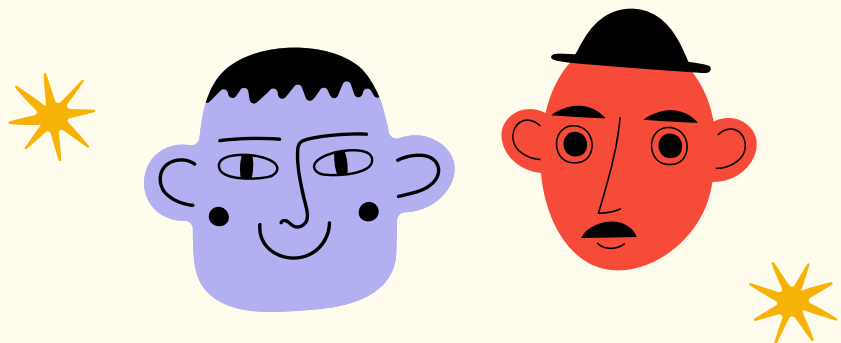
One of the reasons many people avoid discussing climate change or conserving nature is that they underestimate how many others around them already care about it. However, more people believe in climate change and support conservation policies than you think. For example, ~4 in 5 Americans support the endangered species act, whereas only ~1 in 10 oppose it.²

Share your experiences of adopting environmental behaviors

Individuals are influenced by the behavior of our peers.³ When people see or hear about someone doing something, it makes them more likely to do it too. The same goes for our friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances. Normalize environmental actions for others by making it visible!

Think about the values that appeal to the individual person

Research shows that people's values and political views determine their attitudes and behaviors towards environmental issues far more than their scientific knowledge.^{4,5} Luckily, you know the things that your friends and family care about. You can use that knowledge to tailor your arguments to the individual person. For instance, if your parents are health conscious you could talk about the health benefits of a meat-free diet, while you could talk about local impacts of climate change to your neighbors and cite religious scripture for protecting wildlife to a church-going friend.⁶

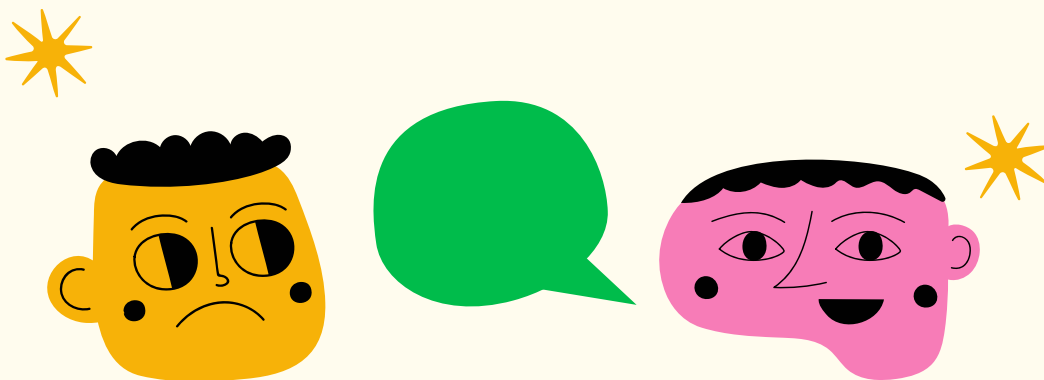


Know the facts if you can...

Familiarize yourself with the facts from credible sources (see the resources suggested earlier in the guide). This will make you feel more confident, and appear more reliable.

...but also keep in mind the power of stories

Stories help make environmental impacts and solutions more relatable and human. For example, it may be easier to provoke an emotional response by talking about the day your cat traumatized you by bringing home three dead baby mice in a row (unfortunately a true story) than by citing studies about the impact of outdoor cats on wild prey animals. You can then bring in the science after sparking interest with an engaging story.

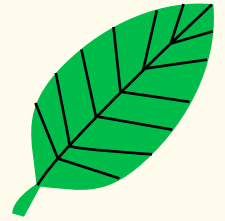


Meet people where they are

We generally go through several “stages of change” when it comes to adopting a new behavior. We move from “precontemplation”, where we’re not even aware a problem exists, to maintenance of the behavior. What you talk about with a person should depend on what stage they’re at. For example, before you can start giving our hints and tips for adopting a plant-based-diet, a person first needs to understand the environmental impact of meat consumption (among other reasons to limit or avoid eating meat). Affirm that it’s never too late to act on the environmental challenges humanity faces and that our individual choices can make a difference.

Help people feel more confident

It's no good convincing people there's a problem or scaring them with doom and gloom if they then feel powerless to help.⁷ Always talk about specific actions people can take to have a positive impact, and help them feel confident in their ability to effect change.



Avoid jargon

When you're interested in a topic and learn the common words and terms used as shorthand for complicated concepts, you can quickly forget that other people don't have your background knowledge. Even words like "biodiversity" can seem murky to someone who hasn't read much about the environment. Using a lot of jargon can be alienating and inhibit people from asking questions. Use simple terms, such as protecting nature instead of protecting biodiversity, or explain what you mean. For example, in an early draft of this guide, the section above was originally titled "Build self-efficacy". We realized this might not be a common term outside of academic circles, and so we changed it to "Help people feel more confident" instead.

Keep it respectful

Always check that individuals are comfortable to engage in a conversation with you about environmental issues. Conduct your conversations respectfully, acknowledging their point of view and listening to what they have to say. Of course, if they do not also treat you respectfully in a discussion, you are also not obligated to remain in the conversation.⁸



Afterwards

Great job! Simply having a tough discussion about environmental issues with someone you know is a major achievement. It might have been stressful, and it might not have ended well, but you can take pride in being a person whose actions match their values!

Now, it is important to keep the momentum going. Remain persistent, but try not to be pushy! It might be helpful to check in periodically and ask your conversation partners if they have tried anything new after your discussion, and how they found it.

Lastly, remain optimistic! Encouraging pro-environmental behavior is a long process that requires reinforcement and feedback, and a strong commitment. Having a positive outlook will make these conversations easier, more meaningful, and more likely to affect change!

If you would like to see hundreds of examples of real environmental discussions for inspiration, you can check out the Talk Climate Change interactive conversation map:

talkclimatechange.org/map

- 1 Sunstein, Cass R., Nudging and Choice Architecture: Ethical Considerations (January 17, 2015). Yale Journal on Regulation, Forthcoming, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2551264>
- 2 Bruskotter, J. T., Vucetich, J. A., Slagle, K. M., Berardo, R., Singh, A. S., & Wilson, R. S. (2018). Support for the U.S. Endangered Species Act over time and space: Controversial species do not weaken public support for protective legislation. *Conservation Letters*, 11(6), e12595. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12595>
- 3 Cialdini, R. B., & Jacobson, R. P. (2021). Influences of social norms on climate change-related behaviors. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.01.005>
- 4 Brody, S., Grover, H., & Vedlitz, A. (2012). Examining the willingness of Americans to alter behaviour to mitigate climate change. *Climate Policy*, 12(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2011.579261>
- 5 Balmford, A., Cole, L., Sandbrook, C., & Fisher, B. (2017). The environmental footprints of conservationists, economists and medics compared. *Biological Conservation*, 214(January), 260-269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2017.07.035>
- 6 Hayhoe, K. & Farley, A. (2011) A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions. FaithWords
- 7 Pradhananga, A. K., & Davenport, M. A. (2022). "I Believe I Can and Should": Self-efficacy, Normative Beliefs and Conservation Behavior. *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education*, 175(1), 15-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1936-704X.2021.3370.x>
- 8 Ettinger, J., McGivern, A., Spiegel, M. P., King, B., Shawoo, Z., Chapin, A., & Finnegan, W. (2023). Breaking the climate spiral of silence: Lessons from a COP26 climate conversations campaign. *Climatic Change*, 176(3), 22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03493-5>