

We often talk about leaving the world a better place for our children. But our kids are not standing idly by while we wonder how to clean up the mess we've made. Energetic, adept with technology and enthusiastic to create change, kids already have the tools to become stewards of the planet's ecological health. And they are ready to start now.

Meanwhile, part of our job as parents, educators and mentors, is to groom our kids to shape the world they want to know. But depending on their age, the tactics will need to vary.

Experts from the Green School in Bali, Indonesia, an international school for students from preschool through grade 12 nestled in the jungle, and Antioch University New England, weigh in on raising the next generation of environmental activists.

Take them outside.

Environmental awareness starts when you take your kids blueberry picking or fishing or allow them to collect twigs to kindle your campfire. "Early life experiences in the wild lead to a lifetime love of nature," said David Sobel, co-director of the Center for Place based Education at Antioch University New England and the author of several books on childhood and nature. Studies show that most environmental activists attribute their ecological values to both time spent outdoors as a child and to an adult who taught them respect for nature. Sobel strongly encourages parents to allow their kids to take advantage of available green space. Picnic in the park. Collect flowers. Hike through the woods. Strike up a conversation about growing crops and caring for livestock with a vendor at your local farmers' market. With older kids, who tend to be less interested in exploring the world with their parents, look for after-school programs that offer ample outdoor time, or recreational groups they can join to bike, surf, or orienteer in the company of their peers.

Exploring nature in your backyard or neighborhood park is fundamental to inspiring a future environmentalist, way before tackling conversations about the fate of planet Earth. "Too often we see parents talk about their own environmental anxiety, like ice caps melting or mosquito-borne diseases spreading, but they jump over basic access to wild nature and allowing kids to love the outdoors," Sobel said. "That's counterproductive."

Enlist the little ones' help with the cat or the basil.

Kids have a natural sense of empathy, notes Glenn Chickering, the head of Green School's middle and upper school. As a result, they're inclined to treat animals and plants with respect and compassion. To build on this instinct, invite your kids to help take care of a pet, your houseplants, or a sidewalk sapling. Work with them to grow a favorite fruit or vegetable in the garden or on a windowsill or to attract bees and butterflies to the yard. Tasks like these set kids up to grow up feeling a responsibility to protect and care not just for nature in their own realm but also for the wildlife and wild places they might never see.

Explore problems and solutions with your tween.

Around fourth and fifth grade, a child's sense of the world expands. They're ready to discuss the human impact on nature and to investigate what's harming our environment.

"At that stage of life, children want to understand how, for example, building a farm or a city or a golf course might impact animals," Chickering said. "But they also want to find solutions. They want to know who's working on a problem, and they want to help." So, for example, if you take your kid to the beach and notice bleached coral, you might start by researching the threats to reefs, then work together to find an organization dedicated to helping them and look into how you can get involved. It's important to make kids feel empowered early on, Chickering adds.

Give your tween an easy win by auditing your own home and habits together. Strategize together a way your household can reduce waste and use less fossil fuels. You can also get crafty with your recycling efforts, to encourage kids to be more aware of our disposable culture. At Green School, for example, fifth-graders have saved natural resources by creating a neck pillow from recycled material, a notebook from the blank pages of previously discarded notebooks, and a bamboo skateboard.

Seek out volunteer science projects.

There are plenty of opportunities for older kids to get involved in neighborhood conservation efforts, whether that's through helping with trail maintenance, ecological restoration, or the control of invasive plant species. Many regional and national organizations also offer opportunities to get involved in broader efforts, such as the National Park Service's Youth Conservation Corp.

Citizen science projects, where members of the public help collect environmental data that support a scientific study, also offer great opportunities for kids to get involved. Some may even tap into a teenager's passion for, say, surfing—as with an ocean acidification project in San Diego run by the Scripps Institute—or photography, as with projects like Nature Groupie's effort to photograph vernal pools in New Hampshire.

Encourage big thinking.

Of course, some kids are ready to change the world even before we grown-ups are ready to let them. But as their parents and teachers, it's our job to encourage their passions. You can find inspiration by checking out child-led projects at Young Voices for the Planet.

A set of sisters who attend the Green School successfully campaigned to rid Bali of plastic bags, a goal they set upon when they were 10 and 12, respectively. They started with a petition to ban plastic bags and set a goal of collecting one million signatures. A combination of perseverance, naiveté and charm got them in the door of the manager of

Bali's airport, who authorized them to collect signatures behind customs and immigration. After a year and a half of requests to meet with Bali's governor, Mangku Pastika, he finally agreed and then vowed to make the island plastic-bag free.

"We have learned that kids can do anything," Melati Wijsen said of the campaign in a 2015 TED talk she gave with her sister. "We can make things happen ... Kids have a boundless energy and a motivation to be the change the world needs."

Source: ecowatch