Who can convince those who reject climate science? Maybe their kids

Enlarge / Give kids something to talk about, and they'll take it home with them.

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There are significant generational differences when it comes to opinions on climate change in the US. Students are more open to learning about this scientific issue without getting snagged on the culture wars that have divided American opinions along political and cultural lines, which probably explains why younger people are less likely than their grandparents to claim that climate science is "a hoax." But can kids help us with that problem *now*, or will they have to wait decades for their turn behind the levers of power?

A team of researchers led by North Carolina State University's Danielle Lawson set out to test how kids affect their parents' opinions by bringing what they learn home. The researchers recruited middle school teachers in coastal North Carolina, assigning some to try out a specific climate change lesson plan and using the rest as a control group for comparison. In total, about 200 families went through the experimental curriculum, with about 100 kids in the control group taking unchanged classes.

The experimental curriculum consisted of four class activities

teaching students about the difference between weather and climate and how climate change impacts the species around them. They then participated in a relevant local community project. This experience was designed to fulfill education standards but also to be similar to other lesson plans in which novel experiences have been shown to get kids talking at home, resulting in parental attitude changes. To that end, the kids were also given an assignment to interview their parents about their perceptions of changes in the local weather.

All of the students and parents filled out surveys assessing their opinions on climate change and whether their family had discussed the topic. The results showed that, unsurprisingly, the experience increased the students' concern about climate change. But it *also* had an effect on their parents. There were significant increases in parental concern about the topic—particularly among the demographics that started out *least* concerned.

Enlarge / Changes in parents’ concern about climate change measured in the control group (top) and the families of kids who tried a new lesson plan (bottom).

While male and female parents of all political stripes showed an increase, conservative parents changed much more than the rest, and fathers increased a bit more than mothers. The survey asked about their level of concern on a five-point scale from “not at all worried” to “extremely worried.” The average increase for conservative parents was one point up on the scale—changing from “a little worried” to “moderately worried,” for example.

Curiously, conservative parents in the control group also showed a slight increase in concern over time, so part of the change in answers may be simply down to answering the survey multiple times—or maybe even because Hurricane Matthew hit the area during the experiment.

The survey results also show a link between changes in concern and an increase in family discussion, supporting the hypothesis behind the experiment. And daughters seemed to have a larger effect on their parents than sons did. The researchers mentioned a few possible explanations for this. Girls actually ended up with a higher level of concern about climate change than boys, which could be part of it. They also note that adolescent girls may be a little better at communicating with their parents than boys. But at the same time, parents of girls answered the survey with lower concern at the start (and both before and after in the control group), which could be the result of a little gender bias, taking science assignments less seriously for girls.

Overall, the experiment can be seen as encouraging. Adults who have shut their ears to discussions of climate change because they associate it with political battle lines can still listen if their kids care about it. The researchers mention former Republican Congressman Bob Inglis (whom Ars once interviewed about this topic) as an anecdotal example. While representing South Carolina, Inglis changed his position on climate change in part because of heartfelt conversations with his children.

As someone who just finished teaching a university “intro to climate change” course, I joked a few times about some piece of information being particularly useful around the Thanksgiving dinner table. This study provides some evidence that this isn’t just a matter of self-defense against the rants of conspiracy-minded uncles. Students’ family members may actually hear them out.

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