



National Children's Health and Climate Leadership Forum 2020

Summary of Conference Proceedings & Key Actions

National Children’s Health and Climate Leadership Forum Goals and Objectives

There is an urgent need to advance climate solutions to protect children, one of our most precious and vulnerable populations, from the harmful impacts of climate change. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and ecoAmerica hosted the virtual National Children’s Health and Climate Leadership Forum in October 2020 to:

1. Share information, ideas, opportunities and best practices in addressing children’s health and wellbeing amidst increasing impacts of climate change.
2. Increase awareness and inspire action on climate change and children’s health.
3. Build leadership, capacity, and collaboration to address just and equitable solutions that prioritize children’s health and youth engagement.

The AAP and ecoAmerica brought together 75 AAP members, environmental organizations, and health leaders for two days of presentations and discussion. Participants in the Forum were tasked with developing action plans designed towards building ambitious and just climate solutions. The AAP and ecoAmerica are offering technical assistance to participants as they implement their plans.

As the AAP Policy Statement on Global Climate Change and Children’s Health states, “Although uncertainties remain regarding risks and appropriate policy response, failure to take prompt, substantive action — given our current knowledge — would be an act of injustice to all children.” New or prospective partners can watch sessions from the Forum and use the Action Plan Template on p. 12 to design next steps.



“The work you all have done, are doing, and will do is instrumental to improving children’s health now and for centuries to come.” — Sara “Sally” Goza, MD, FAAP



“There’s a lot of work to be done, but it’s also a tremendous opportunity and responsibility. Thank you for taking this on... We all have an important role to play in protecting children.”— Vera “Fan” Tait, MD, FAAP



“Make the commitment and then be an example. When you vote, plan your meals, buy a car, talk to colleagues or friends, when you set your thermostat, you’re not just doing your part, you’re setting an example for everybody. You’re like a pebble thrown into the pond and the ripples edge out.” — Bob Perkowitz

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Four Themes Emerged from the National Children’s Health and Climate Leadership Forum

1. Climate change is threatening human health, safety, and security; and children are some of the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Stakeholders can develop a clear, consistent, and easily understood vision for a healthier and more equitable future to mobilize decision makers and the public to act on climate. **Offering specific actions, strategies, and solutions for achieving that future can be a powerful way of inspiring action.**
2. There is a need to **increase awareness of the connection between children’s health and climate change** — among the public and among those who may be especially well positioned to act or to educate others (e.g., medical professionals). Leaders and stakeholders in the climate movement and children’s health sectors can collaborate to develop educational tools and resources tailored to a variety of audiences, including early education providers.
3. While global or national-level initiatives to inspire action on climate change and children’s health are important, organizing, networking, and acting at the local level can be especially impactful. **Community involvement on the local level that includes diverse stakeholders builds resilience** and can have an immediate impact on people’s lives and livelihoods.
4. **It is critical to integrate intergenerational justice and racial justice into all aspects of the climate movement** and related efforts to protect children’s health. Climate change exacerbates existing injustices and inequities; the voices of historically marginalized communities and those who are most impacted by climate change should be central in decision-making. The amplification of these voices can correct past injustices and build climate solutions that create healthy communities now and for the future.



Day 1 — Mobilizing for Action

During concurrent breakout sessions, participants discussed what their organization, or they as individuals, can and will do to advocate for children's health amidst the increasing impacts of climate change and to lead on equitable and just climate solutions.



“Tackling climate change is the biggest group project in history, and that’s why we’re all here together... The institutions we all represent today differ, yet we all have a very similar goal of leaving a livable world for our children.”
— Lori Byron, MD, MPH, FAAP



“None of us can solve this problem on our own but we really don’t have the privilege, the freedom to not work on this problem. It’s that important. It’s what we have to do in order to make things better for kids in the future.”
— Jerry Paulson, MD, FAAP

The following action items emerged from the discussion groups:

Elevate and support youth voices in the climate movement

Amplify youth voices in climate advocacy work, as youth are and will continue to be, more impacted by climate change than adults. Youth have a clear vision for climate and health equity. Partner with youth; advocate alongside them on important issues that span across the climate movement.

Connect children’s health and climate impacts with other relevant issues

Climate and children’s health advocates play an important role in raising awareness at every level about the interconnectedness of climate change’s impact on children’s health and wellbeing. Environmental racism, extreme weather events, climate change impacts on mental health and the toll on entire populations garner a lot of attention. These impacts present opportunities to highlight unique vulnerabilities children face, and the urgency for action.

Integrate principles of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in all aspects of climate and health work

Engage with groups and individuals who are underrepresented but often most at risk of the impacts of climate change. When discussing climate justice, racial justice, or COVID-19 related inequities, advocates have an opportunity to make linkages between these issues. The recent increased awareness of racial justice issues and environmental racism presents an opening to start or build on conversations related to children’s health and climate action.

Identify more funding and create more equitable access to existing resources to address climate and children's health

Additional funding is needed to support the range of existing efforts, including advocacy, education, communication, and research, to reduce the impacts of climate change on children's health. Funding is also needed to create green infrastructure and green spaces that will support children's health and reduce the impacts of climate change. Compiling and sharing information on funding opportunities would be especially helpful.

Equip advocates and policymakers with action-oriented resources

Climate and health research and resources are necessary to be able to make informed decisions on climate solutions. Health professionals can use these materials to communicate more effectively with audiences that include patients, peers, professional organizations, communities, and policymakers.

Activate networks outside of the climate sector

Children are a strong motivator for climate action across stakeholder groups (e.g., faith, poverty, justice, etc.) and their health and wellbeing can be a unifying call to action on climate. Partnerships between organizations and different sectors working at different scales can accelerate a call to action on climate solutions. The climate movement is stronger when rural and small communities and corporations are engaged in climate action, and when connections are made with new partners to collaborate.

Develop and integrate climate and health curricula for health professionals

Climate change is an increasingly important part of health curricula, including medical, nursing, mental health and public health education. It is a critical topic for new students as well as for continuing education.

Highlight the health benefits of connecting children with nature

Healthcare professionals could write prescriptions for patients to spend more time outdoors or in nature as a clinical tool to teach children and families about environmental health and the benefits of being outdoors.



“[There were] so many important connections we talked about to strengthen our advocacy ... our watch words as advocates are: honesty, hope, and action.”

— Aparna Bole, MD, FAAP

Day 2 — Advocating Collectively to Protect Children’s Health



“Everyone cares about children’s health. When you talk about climate change, talk about children’s health.”
— Leyla McCurdy, MPhil



“In pediatrics, we have the privilege to see the world through the eyes of the children we care for, and in doing so, we cannot ignore how the environment influences their health.”
— Harleen Marwah



“This crisis is to acknowledge and prioritize the many people of color and marginalized communities who are disproportionately affected by the growing change in climate... We’re not just observing an awareness of the crisis, we’re observing a new form of climate action motivated by the kinds of health risks everyone has spoken about these past two days.”
— Sabirah Mahmud



“The work the youth movement has done has transformed the climate movement. We no longer need to ask how to get more youth involved in climate action. Instead we need to be asking ourselves what more can we do to support them.”
— Meighen Speiser

Day 2 — Advocating Collectively to Protect Children’s Health

Participants chose from five topics to discuss opportunities to advocate for and protect children’s health amidst the increasing impacts of climate change and to lead on equitable and just climate solutions. Potential actions identified during each topical group discussion are summarized here:

Learning from the Next Generation of Climate Leaders

- **Include children and adolescent voices** and perspectives in advocacy efforts; they are effective advocates on their own behalf.
- Create a video collection of personal stories that demonstrates connections between children’s health and climate action and can be used to advocate for climate solutions. **Personal stories** can be powerful teaching tools.
- Invest resources to train future leaders on climate and health literacy, as well as leadership and advocacy. **Paid internships** are important for youth and young adults to develop professional skills and networks.
- Invite and encourage diverse voices to participate in the conversation. To effectively **center equity and justice in climate action**, climate health advocates can follow the lead of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change on how to engage new and different partners and stakeholders.

Engaging Pediatricians

- **Support the professional needs of pediatric providers**, including addressing climate solutions to protect children. Pediatricians are motivated to create healthy environments for their patients to thrive. They are effective climate advocates because they are trusted and can serve as nonpartisan experts, complementing the work of environmental advocates.
- Encourage pediatricians to incorporate education on the health impacts of climate change into **daily pediatric practice**, to meet the interests and concerns of families.
- **Take concrete steps** for pediatric practices and hospitals to reduce their carbon footprints. They can begin by presenting evidence-based information on cost-savings and health benefits to hospital administrations.
- Connect pediatricians with **AAP state chapters** and their designated climate advocates to support local and grassroots advocacy.
- Support the work of **BIPOC advocates** and amplify the voices of historically marginalized communities. Pediatricians can also connect ongoing environmental justice and health equity efforts with opportunities to protect children’s health.
- Harness the **institutional influence of pediatricians** and the organizations they represent to address broader challenges that grassroots efforts may not have the capacity to engage.

Climate and Health Education

- Begin climate and health education early by building the climate health nexus into **K-12 curricula**.
- **Align climate and health education** with existing health and medical education requirements.
- **Explore partnerships** between climate and health advocates, the private sector, and civil society organizations to help educate children and parents about the connection between climate and health (e.g., scouting groups, conservation groups, electricity providers, healthcare institutions).
- Bolster **local health department leadership** on climate and health solutions, as they are an important source of information and guidance for communities.
- Leverage **multiple kinds of expertise** for mutual benefit through a team approach to education (e.g., a climate scientist and a pediatrician can work together to provide evidence demonstrating the health impacts of climate change).

Raising Awareness of Eco-anxiety and Mental Health

- Develop formal diagnostic tools and conduct additional research to establish consistent terminology in cases of **eco-anxiety and eco-grief**.
- **Normalize conversations around mental health** needs broadly, which create opportunities to discuss the mental health impacts of climate change.
- Promote training for health professionals on eco-anxiety. The environmental health community has taken up the call on climate action; there is an opportunity to **expand the inclusion of mental health** in their work.
- Address and **validate youth anger and anxiety directly**. Youth are particularly angry at the generations before them who did not enact healthy climate policy changes decades ago.
- **Work with faith leaders**, who are often trained to respond to mental health trauma. This is true more broadly, as well, but many people of faith are feeling a profound sense of grief and distress about how the climate crisis is affecting young people, so faith leaders can be a powerful ally in climate work.
- Address local needs. Understanding **local climate impacts** can help communities prepare for potential local health and environmental threats and address environmental and public health needs within their communities.

Children's Health Policy Advocacy

- Create a common vision for a healthier future grounded in **“radical optimism.”** The vision can focus on the future we are looking to create for all generations, and can center on solutions and action.
- Ensure **equity and justice are centered in climate advocacy** efforts. Build diversity within the climate advocacy movement, especially at the leadership level.
- **Educate policymakers** and the public on the connection between climate and health, including children's health. When people learn about the impacts climate change has on their health and wellbeing, they are more willing and likely to take action.
- Build the case for economic action. **Understanding economic benefits** and job creation from climate action (coupled with the health benefits) could motivate decision makers. It is also important to explain the cost of inaction, which we cannot afford.
- Implement solutions at the local level and **tailor messages to local and regional audiences.** Train local health professionals in policy and advocacy skills.
- Identify and deploy a diverse array of **trusted messengers** to help advocate for climate action, including youth leaders.
- **Engage with faith groups,** who can be powerful allies for educating the public about the negative health impacts of climate change and can provide a forum for local action.
- Provide more funding to smaller, **local advocacy groups.** These groups and the communities they represent often face the brunt of climate impacts and can tell their own stories to make a strong case for action.



Vote Kids: Climate Change and the 2020 Election

Let's Talk Climate Webcast Series episode on October 29, 2020



In conjunction with the National Children's Health and Climate Leadership Forum, ecoAmerica's Climate for Health program hosted a special episode of the Let's Talk Climate webcast series, "Vote Kids: Climate Change and the 2020 Election." Youth climate leaders Sophia Kianni, Climate Cardinals, and Diana Fernández, The National Children's Campaign, as well as Aparna Bole, MD, FAAP, Chair, American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Environmental Health discussed the climate health emergency, its effect on youth and their health, and striving for an equitable climate future.

Young people have always been on the front lines of change and the youth leading on climate are heading to the polls this election, many for the first time. Sophia asked listeners, "If your vote didn't matter, then why are people trying so hard to take it away? The reason is because your vote really does matter."

"Any youth voters, anyone who might be voting for the first time in this election, or is new to voting or the political scene; I'd like you to carry the image of the future into the voting booth..." — Diana Fernandez

"This is what I will be thinking about when I vote, I am thinking about a child. I would like to envision a child and no matter what her skin color or where she lives, she is breathing clean air, she is under a clean sky and she is looking towards the future with a sense of hope and security that the world before her is going to be a healthy place where she can access opportunities to thrive equal to anyone else..." — Aparna Bole, MD, FAAP

Closing Remarks & Next Steps

At the conclusion of the Forum, the AAP and ecoAmerica offered support and technical assistance to individual attendees and organizations as they complete their Action Plans and will follow up throughout the year to help catalyze action.

Action Plan Template

1. What are the actions my organization (or I as an individual) can commit to taking on climate solutions that protect children's health?
2. Who from within my organization do I need to engage to solidify a commitment?
3. To achieve this commitment, what resources or support might I or my organization be able to provide (recognizing you might need to further vet this within your organization)?
4. To achieve this commitment, what resources or support do I or my organization need, beyond what I/it can provide?
5. With whom will I/ my organization need to partner to be able to make and deliver on a commitment?

Participants shared ideas, made connections, and will continue to work together. Major themes of youth leadership, social justice and health equity, and local action will be part of the AAP and ecoAmerica's work to **build support for climate action that puts children's health first**. Thank you to all of the partners, organizers, and participants who were part of the Forum.



"We're better positioned at this moment to tackle climate change and improve children's health ... because of the commitment of the extraordinary leaders who are assembled and the partners who have come together to take on this task together... Let's enable [the next generation] to succeed and get out of their way, and then be incredibly inspired and amazed when they accomplish much more than we ever thought we could do on our own."

— Mark Del Monte, JD

Thank you to all attendees.