

# Will Polar Bears Be OK?

**ANXIETY:** How to talk to kids worried about global warming.

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SEAN HUSSEY AND his twin sister, Erin, are only 9 years old, but they already know all about global warming. And they're worried, very worried. Teachers at their Hillsborough, Calif., school have shown them pictures of melting glaciers. Sean fears that polar bears will be left homeless. "I like polar bears a lot," he explains. Erin is also concerned about what she calls "the animal side" of climate change. "There are lots of animals that shouldn't die," she says. "The humans are the ones who are causing it." Their mother, Pam Hussey, is worried, too, and not just about global warming. She doesn't want her twins to think they're on the edge of disaster. Hussey tells them they can make things better by using less energy. "We are not doomed to failure," she tells them. "Every kid needs hope."

With so much attention focused on potential devastation from climate change, it's not surprising that the message has reached the planet's youngest residents. Images of liquefying glaciers in movies like "Ice Age 2: The Meltdown" are as frightening to these kids as pictures of a mushroom cloud were to youngsters growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. Remembering their own childhood fears



**MELTING:** Glacier photos are startling



**SCARY NEWS:** Replays of images like this Katrina rescue alarm kids

of nuclear annihilation, parents struggle to find a balance between scaring young kids to death and helping them understand a very real problem that they will inherit someday. (A recent poll by a supermarket chain found that 15 percent of British kids blame their parents for the crisis.) "What they need is the truth," says environmental activist Laurie David, author of an upcoming children's book called "The Down-to-Earth Guide to Global Warming." "And then they need solutions." Here's some advice from experts on how to send a message that will encourage youngsters without provoking needless anxiety.

■ **Assure them that they are safe.** Before anything else, parents need to provide support and nurturing, says child psychiatrist Elizabeth Berger, author of "Raising Kids with Character." "If the child is anxious, then you offer your

lap and say, 'Don't worry, honey, the grown-ups who are supposed to be dealing with it are going to deal with it.' Berger's own daughter once came home from elementary school terrified about the hole in the ozone. "Young kids can be very concrete," Berger says. "When you say there's a hole in the ozone, that's like saying there's a hole in the basement." When they're worried about polar bears dying, they may be thinking about whether that means their mom or dad will die, too. "You want to minimize the worry," Berger says.

■ **Turn off the TV.** "What scares kids are these horrible images of bad weather ... like Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami and all the tornadoes and that sort of thing, which seem to be part of global warming," says psychologist Joanne Cantor, a professor of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin and author of "Teddy's TV Troubles," a children's book about dealing with frightening

media. Television makes it worse by constantly replaying scary images of houses washing away. Children under 7 "don't really understand the concept of videotape and that it's not happening over and over again," says Cantor.

■ **Explain the time frame.** Parents should make clear that global warming is a "very slow" process, says Lawrence Balter, a professor of applied psychology at New York University and author of "Dr. Balter's Child Sense." "It's very different from a cataclysmic event, like an explosion," he says. "There's an opportunity for us to learn about how it works and an opportunity to see if we can do something about it."

■ **Teach them to help.** Kids are reassured if they can take action. Emphasize that doom is not inevitable. "Participating in some activity makes you feel like you're part of the solution and less of a victim," Balter says. That strategy has worked for the Tjoelker family in Bryan, Texas. Mark Tjoelker, a forest ecologist who studies global change, discusses scientific news at dinner with his kids, ages 10, 7 and 2. The



**FIREFIGHTERS:** Highlight help

family motto: reuse, reduce, recycle. To do their part, the older kids walk a half mile to school. "I say, 'I'm not going to drive you. That burns fossil fuels,'" says their mother, Elaine. They're doing their part to turn things around, one small step at a time. ■

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