Navigating climate change as a parent and professor – a Q&A with Sabrina Helm

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This is the fifth in a series of articles that follows the writer along on her parenthood journey. Past stories have explored the University’s [parental leave policy](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu), [shared parenting advice](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) from faculty and staff, [introduced new lactation spaces](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) on campus and [shared expert tips for developing a child’s language skills](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu). Have ideas for future stories? Please email them to mikaylamace@arizona.edu.

When I became a mom, two observations triggered renewed reflection on how my environmental impact would change along with me.

First, I was surprised by – and grateful for – how freely families shared clothes, toys and the miscellaneous tools of parenthood. Since we bought less stuff, it had the welcome consequences of saving us money and – I think – lowering our carbon footprint. The other observation was how much more easily our growing family created trash! Especially when we found ourselves short on sleep and time, and so many convenient options were available, like snacks and disposable diapers.

As I write this, a nature documentary plays in the background. David Attenborough is explaining that mother albatrosses inadvertently feed their babies so much plastic harvested from the ocean that their babies can starve. Try as I might to be environmentally conscious for the babies of the world – including ones with feathers – the simple act of raising my own makes the future a little more polluted and uncertain.

I know many other parents share this anxiety. Thankfully, [Sabrina Helm](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu), an associate professor in the [Norton School of Human Ecology](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) and the [College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu), looks at it differently. She studies the intersections of climate change, marketing, consumption and mental health. She is also the faculty co-chair for the University’s [Sustainability and Climate Action Plan](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) and her research has covered everything from [how marketing and business educators can help combat climate change](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) to [the different types of climate coping mechanisms](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu) and even [why climate change is driving some to skip having kids](https://uaatwork.arizona.edu).

"While I am concerned about the future my child will face," she said, "I don’t subscribe to the view that having a child should be seen as a carbon footprint issue. Fighting climate change needs to happen on a systems, not individual, level and instilling guilt in ourselves is not a good motivator for action and change."

I was intrigued by her research and the fact that she also has a child. I asked her to discuss her experiences and tips as a climate-conscious mother and faculty member. Our interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

**How did having a child change the way you approached your research, teaching and environmentalism?**

My research has involved climate change for about 10 years, but it became really personal when I had my child. It also became much scarier, and I developed more climate change anxiety. I can see now that was a big trigger for me. I was asking: Should I even have a child? How can anyone involved in climate change topics, or anyone today have a child? It was quite difficult, and then you have a young child and you’re too busy to deal with any of these questions!

In terms of how I go about parenting, I became energized to really reflect on parenting during a climate crisis. Specifically, how I can approach a discussion with my son when the time comes, and this actually had an effect on my research. My research used to be about climate change and consumption, but now I’m more focused on the psychological effects of climate change and how we talk about it.

**What age will you start talking to him about it?**

He’s in first grade and it's becoming clear that communication needs to start. When they’re so young, I don’t think it makes any sense to broach a heavy subject like that. What I’ve been doing from the start – but it’s also in my nature – is I take him out into the environment. He loves it. This is the healthy foundation that will eventually evolve into conversations about his role in a future affected by climate change and hopefully result in an understanding and need to do something for the environment.

In the same way that parents prepare to talk to their children about "the birds and the bees," I feel I need to prepare myself for this conversation. There are lots of resources online, but you still have to find your own way appropriate for your particular child.

I also think it’s important to ensure we don’t dump our own emotional garbage on our children while we’re still trying to
cope with climate anxiety ourselves. If it's during a peak anxiety time, that's not the time to talk to them. You have to remain the rock in their life and provide them with a sense of agency. That's difficult when we're in the mindset of panic. It's important to deal with that first if possible before trying to address these potentially scary topics with children.

What are three behavioral changes you encourage parents to make?

I've been a not-very-strict vegetarian for a long time. That was easy for me, but I fully understand that there are also limitations with regard to being able to change one's diet. My son is not vegetarian, but he observes my choices and talks to me about it. He still eats meat. I'm fairly sure that that's going to change at some point, but he's too young in my perspective to encourage it.

One really impactful thing I have done is reflected on my potential influence. I found that the biggest impact I have is through my teaching. That includes talking with my students, creating classes that target sustainability issues, my involvement in the Sustainability and Climate Action Plan for the University, making my voice heard, and talking with everyone under the sun about climate change. And again, whether I prepare to talk with my young child, or whether I prepare to talk with my students, I have to do that in a very deliberate manner. I really have to reflect on what my messaging is going to be and adapt it to my audience. I encourage faculty to adapt their messaging to radiate active hope instead of doom and despair. They can do that in a very effective manner, but they need to read up on that.

One thing I do as a parent to two dogs that might be surprising is I feed them two kinds of kibble. One is meat-based and the other is plant-based. I said that once in front of the dean of the College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences, Shane Burgess [12]. He's a veterinarian, so he knows much more about that than I do, and he said dogs are omnivores, so of course they can eat plant-based food. I was relieved that I wasn't doing anything wrong. They are thriving and have been eating it for many years.

Have these changes had an impact on your climate anxiety?

Despite all this, I have a large carbon footprint. I live out here in the desert in a comparatively large house. It can't get much worse to be very frank. So, I do consider all the time how to deal with the fact that my lifestyle doesn't match my identity and my values. It's a continuous journey. There are ups and downs. When I feel inspired, when I'm doing something, I feel empowered and I'm talking to students about what they can do and I think this is good, this is working. And that takes that worry away for a while, but it does resurface.

Mikayla Mace Kelley is a science writer for University Communications and a new mom.

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