

Valley KIDS

THE PAPER FOR PARENTS

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-Chris Harris

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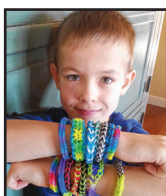
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Publisher: Dennis Skoglund

Executive Editor: Tim Blagg

Editor: Chris Harris, Ext. 265

Advertising Director: Jon Stafford

Advertising Sales: Risa Sudolsky, Ext. 215; e-mail rsudolsky@recorder.com

Circulation Director: Kevin LaMagdelaine, Ext. 230

Director of Operations: Doug Hillman, Ext. 206

Mailing Address: Valley Kids, The Recorder, P.O. Box 1367, Greenfield, MA 01302

Physical Address: 14 Hope St., Greenfield, Mass.

Editorial e-mail address: charris@recorder.com

Advertising e-mail address: rsudolsky@recorder.com

On the cover: Start your child off right for a lifetime of family skiing memories. See story on page 8.

GREEN FUTURE



Photo/Jessica Schultz/Hitchcock Center

A spoonful of honey helps the climate change message go down for these children learning about honeybees at Bramble Hill Farm in Amherst.

You got to 'accentuate the positive'

Teaching kids about climate change means giving them power, not nightmares

By MAUREEN TURNER
Special to Valley Kids

The staff at Amherst's Hitchcock Center for the Environment often hear from parents and teachers looking for advice on how to teach kids about such a complex and potentially frightening topic as climate change, said Casey Beebe, an educator and coordinator of community programs at the center.

"There's this urgency for this next generation to be informed," Beebe explained. But how to do that — well, that's a tricky one. At times, she said, well-meaning adults have



HITCHCOCK EDUCATOR
CASEY BEEBE

approached Hitchcock with offers to show educational videos on the topic that she described as "horri-fying" (think: heavy emphasis on polar bears in peril); other times, teachers will approach center staff saying they'd like to include climate

change in their curriculum but can't find material appropriate for young students.

Those experiences led Hitchcock to create a new discussion group for parents and educators focused on kids and climate change. "Here we are, the local environmental education center — what better place to host something like this, and fill this niche?" Beebe said.

Hitchcock hosted the first "Parenting and Climate Change Discussion" in November. Hosted

by Beebe, fellow Hitchcock educator Colleen Kelley, and Ruthie Ireland, a teacher at Arcadia Nature Preschool in Easthampton, the meeting drew a small but engaged group of parents, college students and educators. The agenda, Beebe said, was left deliberately open ended;

instead, the organizers were eager to hear what questions and ideas the participants raised. While the environmental educators have expertise and access to resources, they're still figuring out how best

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Photo/Jessica Schultz/Hitchcock Center.

Hans Leo, education director and farmer at Bramble Hill farm, Amherst, teaches homeschoolers how to keep honeybees healthy and productive. The visit was part of a program taught by Katie Koerten of Hitchcock Center for the Environment. Ultimately, the group put together a website offering solutions to the problems facing honeybees.

Climate change: Empowering kids

Continued from previous page

to approach this challenging topic, both as teacher and parents themselves, she added.

To kick off the meeting, participants were divided into small groups and asked to make a list of the issues on their minds and what they'd like to see future forums address.

During a larger group discussion, participants acknowledged how hard it can be, even as adults, to grapple with the implications of climate change, given the vastness of the issue and the fear and uncertainty that surround it. A Hampshire College student who was taking a course on climate-change education said some days the class left her feeling energized but acknowledged that, "honestly, there are some days when I leave feeling like crap."

Susan Howe of Belchertown, an environmental scientist and hydrologist and the mother of a third-grader, noted how hard it can be to find an entry point for addressing concerns about climate change. "It's relevant to my life but it's not graspable," she said.

"Maybe we don't need to fully grasp it all to act," Beebe responded. "In fact, that's probably unnecessary."

Much of the discussion focused on the need for optimism, for a belief that individuals — even kids — can take steps to address climate change that can help make a difference. "Even at a really young age, that's really empowering," Kelley said. "Kids want to know where they can take action."



"Kids want to know where they can take action."

Colleen Kelley
Hitchcock educator

Hitchcock teacher Katie Koerten offered an inspiring example of the kinds of action kids can take: last fall, she taught a program for homeschoolers on honeybees, including Colony Collapse Disorder and other problems they face. The group met a beekeeper at neighboring Bramble Hill Farm and learned about the methods he uses to keep his bees healthy and productive — such as organic plant-growing methods — as well as the dangers posed to bees by pesticide use.

"It was really scary and hard to hear about," Koerten said. But rather than shrink from the topic, her students were eager to find solutions. Ultimately, the group put together a website (sites.google.com/site/hitchcockbees/) that includes copies of letters the kids wrote to lawmakers and pesticide companies ("Dear pesticide mak-

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Climate: Becoming mindful consumers

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ers, Can you stop makeing (sic) pesticide because you are killing all the bees,” one reads) as well as a link to information about how people can create a “bee haven” in their backyard.

The kids, Koerten said, were enthusiastic and thoughtful about the project. “It felt really hopeful and cool.”

And while adults need to take care not to overwhelm them with frightening information that will leave them feeling hopeless, kids can bring a fresh and creative approach to problem solving, Ireland noted. She offered the example of a young neighbor who organized a school recycling program when he was in the sixth grade, went on to tackle the problem of buses idling outside schools and is now a college student working on environmental causes.

The conversation also touched on effective but not overwhelming ways adults can help lead children toward thinking about personal responsibility. Howe noted that she encourages her son to be a conscious consumer who thinks about the environmental effects of the things he buys. Kelley described a homeschool class she taught that considered how everyday things are made. They studied, for instance, the high energy use that goes into producing a bag of fast-food French fries, then made their own by digging up and cooking potatoes from Bramble Hill.

“It’s important not to put kids down for their footprint, but to encourage them to be mindful consumers and think about the decisions they make,” Kelley said.

Children also learn from the choices their parents make, Beebe added. Her toddler son, she said, “has no idea about electricity other than solar electricity. That’s his normal: power comes from the solar panels on our roof. Isn’t that cool?”



Photo/Jessica Schultz/Hitchcock Center

At Bramble Hill farm in Amherst, a homeschooler learns about challenges facing honeybees. “It felt really hopeful and cool,” said Hitchcock teacher Katie Koerten.

After the meeting, Beebe said the discussion group might form working groups to take on specific topics raised by participants, such as gathering kid-friendly resources on climate change and organizing

public education and outreach efforts. She also hopes to see the broader conversation continue at future meetings, with more participants. “I kind of think of it almost in a support-group model: sharing strategies, sharing stories, so we can

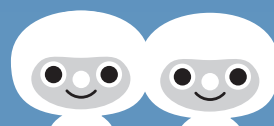
both be inspired by each other and cautioned by each other,” she said. “I think the goal is making sure people get heard and [feel] more connected.”

Join the discussion

The next Parenting and Climate Change Discussion will take place on Tuesday, Feb. 11, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Hitchcock Center for the Environment at 525 South Pleasant St. in Amherst. For information, go to www.hitchcockcenter.org or call 413-256-6006.

■ The next Parenting and Climate Change Discussion will take place Tuesday, Feb. 11, from 6 to 8 p.m., at the Hitchcock Center for the Environment at 525 South Pleasant St., in Amherst.

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