



Guide for Parents and Teachers: How to Talk to Kids About the Gulf Oil Spill

News about the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is in the newspaper, on TV and the radio. This disaster is difficult enough for adults to comprehend and deal with. For kids, it can seem even more complicated and scary. Do you have a child or student asking about what's happening in the Gulf? Or worrying about the consequences?

Here are some tips to help you talk about the Gulf oil spill together—and to equip your student or child to better understand and cope with environmental problems in the future.

- 1. Be age appropriate.** The millions of gallons of oil that have poured into the Gulf of Mexico from the exploded and sunken offshore oil well have caused a major environmental disaster. If children ask questions about it, provide them with reassuring, age-appropriate answers.
 - **Preschool/Early elementary:** This is a time for children to explore the immediate environment (backyard, neighborhood, nearby parks) in a way that is hands-on and full of joy. It's not a time for them to worry about environmental tragedies. There's no need to bring up the oil spill if a child doesn't ask about it. If he or she has questions, by all means address them—but keep your answers brief and basic. Assure the child that grown-ups are working hard on solutions. The very best thing you can do as the teacher or parent of a very young child is to foster in him or her a strong, positive connection with the natural world. This builds a foundation for caring about global environmental problems later in life. (For ideas and resources to connect your child with nature, visit www.greenhour.org.)
 - **Upper elementary:** As their ability to think abstractly increases, older children will be able to discuss the oil spill and its consequences in more depth. This is the time to talk about the child's questions and ideas, model your own interest in learning more about the issue, and take concrete action to lessen your dependence on oil as a school and/or family. At the same time, continue exploring and enjoying your own environment! Programs at local nature centers, hikes, fishing and camping trips, and other outdoor activities all foster care for the planet.
 - **Middle school and beyond:** Now is the time when children's capacity to understand complex scientific concepts is expanding. As it does, so will their concern about the impacts of environmental tragedies on people and wildlife. Encourage children to continue exploring the issue—and to delve into the aspects that especially interest them. Provide opportunities for children to clarify and express their own views.

- 2. Follow your child's lead.** Let the child guide the conversation. Listen carefully to his or her questions and concerns. It may be hard to hold back, especially if you know a lot or are passionate about this subject, but it's important not to overload the child with information he or she isn't ready for.
- 3. Answer questions.** To effectively answer children's questions, it's important to be informed yourself. For more child-friendly information about the oil spill, go to our [Kids Questions](http://www.nwf.org/Kids/Ranger-Rick/People-and-Places/Ranger-Rick-on-the-Big-Oil-Spill.aspx) web page. (<http://www.nwf.org/Kids/Ranger-Rick/People-and-Places/Ranger-Rick-on-the-Big-Oil-Spill.aspx>) If the child stumps you, try to find an answer together!
- 4. Diffuse fear.** There's no doubt that the impacts of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are scary. If children are anxious or upset by what they have heard, acknowledge these fears. Then try to diffuse them by steering the conversation toward actions adults are taking to clean up the mess and ensure it doesn't happen again.
- 5. Ease the burden.** Children didn't create this problem. Let them know that many, many grown-ups are working hard to resolve it. Your school and/or family can reduce the likelihood of another accident occurring by making changes in your own life to lessen your dependence on oil. (For ideas and resources on reducing energy consumption, see the Eco-Schools USA [Energy](http://www.nwf.org/Global-Warming/School-Solutions/Eco-Schools-USA/Become-an-Eco-School/Pathways/Energy.aspx) pathway. (<http://www.nwf.org/Global-Warming/School-Solutions/Eco-Schools-USA/Become-an-Eco-School/Pathways/Energy.aspx>))
- 6. Think positively.** Children are naturally optimistic. We'll need every drop of that optimism to clean up the consequences of this environmental tragedy—so be sure they keep it! Emphasize that people are working together to clean up the mess, reduce the environmental impacts, and generate policies and practices that will minimize the likelihood of this happening again.
- 7. Invite participation.** Explain that solving the problem will require some big changes—in society and also in our own daily lives. We'll need to rethink many things, from the way we get energy to the way we build our houses and get around. Simply turning off the lights won't solve the problem. But everyone can play a part in turning the tide.
- 8. Empower action.** Provide opportunities for children to take action at school and at home. Seek out positive steps you can take as a school and/or family. Whenever possible, keep it local and tangible, with visible results. For instance, children may be concerned about the sea birds in the Gulf of Mexico. Acknowledge that they are in danger, but then suggest that they and their families help out with a habitat restoration project that will benefit birds in their own neighborhood.