

April 21, 2010

How to Green Your Parents

By ALLISON ARIEFF



Courtesy of Academy for Global Citizenship: Getting kids interested in nature and their environment can help improve their test scores, reduce childhood obesity and increase self-confidence.

Thursday is the 40th anniversary of the original Earth Day. Over the years, the impact of this once seminal day has lessened. Earth Day brings people together for nice gatherings and noble efforts but has, for the most part, made sustainable action more of an annual event than a daily habit. We've got to change that.

Here's a move in the right direction: launching this Earth Day is Green My Parents, a nationwide effort to inspire and organize kids to lead their families in measuring and reducing environmental impact at home. Not just on Earth Day, but every day. GMP's initial goal is to have its first 100 youth advocates train and educate 100 peers (who will then turn to 100 of their respective peers and so on), with the aim of saving families \$100 million between now and April 2011.

How? By washing in cold water, walking or biking to school/work and kicking the bottled-water habit, for example. GMP's founders suggest that by taking simple steps like those, the average family could save over \$1,000 each year. Green My Parents' official launch is this Thursday morning, with the broadcast of a free online workshop for youth, adults and educators to learn about easy and effective ways to help save the planet. Led by 12-year-old Adora Svitak, a prolific writer, teacher and advocate for literacy and the environment, the broadcast will also be disseminated by book (via paper-saving print-on-demand), Web site and peer-to-peer interaction.

At first glance, GMP seems to be in keeping with countless other efforts urging baby steps toward greener living, through exhortations to replace light bulbs, take shorter showers and so forth. But it is GMP's advocacy strategy that is different — and, I think, really smart. GMP recognizes that young people are inherently attuned to their environment and understand the importance of protecting it. Conversations I've had with kids of late reveal real worries about the future of the planet and concerns about their inability to act. Much as the threat of nuclear war weighed heavily on my generation's youth (I remember our local video store had "The Day After" on permanent display on the counter; you could rent it for free), global warming affects the hearts and minds of kids today. GMP argues, and has already demonstrated, that when they're given tangible steps to help, kids feel part of something larger.

Svitak, who despite her tender age is a frequent lecturer on the global environmental circuit, suggests in her presentations that we [adults] need “childish” thinking: bold ideas, wild creativity and, especially, optimism. At this year’s TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, she told the crowd that “kids’ big dreams deserve high expectations, starting with grownups’ willingness to learn from children as much as to teach.”

Kids still dream about perfection, says Svitak: “They don’t think about limitations, just good ideas.” GMP’s other student champions seem to prove this assertion. They include inspirational powerhouses like high school senior Jordan Howard, who has already shared a stage with Hillary Clinton and lectured on the dangers of plastics and other environmental dangers; 15-year-old Alec Loorz, who founded the advocacy site Kids-vs-Global-Warming.com at 13, the same year he became the youngest trained presenter of Al Gore’s “Inconvenient Truth” talk; and 16-year-old Chloe Maxim, founder of The Lincoln Academy Climate Action Club, a school group dedicated to fighting global warming.

“GMP is a platform that parents can advocate for, kids can lead, that requires better communication, fosters collaboration across various roles in the home, depends on immediate behavior changes (not big investments) and has a payoff that benefits everyone, regardless of respective political or cultural or regional divisions or preferences,” says GMP’s founder, Tom Feegel. “GMP helps prove economic recovery [and] is directly linked, in real practical ways, to the environmental sustainability choices we all make from sunrise to when we go to sleep, every day.”

Within the GMP program, it’s the parents who have to get on board. The kids are already there. So ultimately what this program does is help raise a generation that no longer needs convincing on climate change. All the money-and-planet saving tips should, to them, seem as normal as putting on a seat belt or drinking a cup of coffee in the morning.

I have to welcome, too, GMP’s unabashed fusion of capitalism and carbon footprints: they believe that carrots work better than sticks. Says Feegel, “What works for Wal-Mart, G.E. and H.P., which is aligning the business strategy with sustainability, will work at a grassroots level, too.”

It’s been difficult enough to get people to carry reusable bags to the grocery store; incentives help, and saving \$100 month is a big incentive. Tiny as many of the green steps are, they cumulatively result in households geared toward collective action. Kids are urged not just to find ways to save money and energy but to negotiate with their parents for a percentage of the realized savings in return for their initiative. Environmental, familial and financial responsibility are linked, so the effort isn’t so much about being an environmentalist as it is about being a responsible, engaged and caring member of the family.

This essentially amounts to a sort of systems-thinking-type approach to sustainability from the ground up, or what the authors of the new book called “The Third Teacher: 79 Ways You Can Use Design to Transform Teaching and Learning” would call ecological design.

The “third teacher”? It’s the environment. Accordingly, the book’s proposed solutions include “Make health and safety a classroom project and develop lesson plans that will produce real improvements to the learning environment” and “Free Choice: Life is full of choices. Prepare kids by giving them a say at school.” Ultimately, learning is less about individual subjects, more about contemplating systems and their interconnectedness. Courtesy of OWP/P | Cannon Design and James Steinkamp Photography Connecting kids to their environment is core to the philosophy of Green My Parents and The Third Teacher. These students at Chicago’s Rogers Park Montessori School are taught from an early age that care of the environment is a fundamental value.

Green My Parents supports such an approach. And while they haven’t reinvented the wheel, they’ve designed a program that makes behavior change easy and economically rewarding for participants. Such a clear directive is key right now, given the general lack of success in communicating sustainability’s importance to the public. It should be abundantly clear that the average person isn’t going to act on behalf of polar bears, let alone take the time to understand cap and trade. By reaching out to kids, you’re reaching out to a population that most likely doesn’t need to be persuaded that there’s a problem and, significantly, that hasn’t had time to develop ingrained habits around daily acts like driving, shopping and showering. As technology improves, behavior will change. GMP champion Howard, in a recent blog post about her experience test-driving an electric car together with her younger sister, observed that the experience “is revolutionary because she’ll NEVER drive a gas car.” Raising a generation that — finally — won’t even need to make a distinction between “green” and “normal” is our best path to success.

