**Presentation to UBC Faculty Women’s Club, October 2019**

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**Suzuki Elders and our work with Youth**

I speak to you today as a Suzuki Elder. Suzuki Elders are a voluntary group of self identified elders working with and through the David Suzuki Foundation. The core of the Suzuki Elder purpose statement is this: *“we mentor, encourage and support other elders and the younger generations in dialogue and action on the environment.* ``

Since 2011 we’ve put energy into making specific links with youth. We’ve learned a few things along the way, about working with them and about our role as Suzuki Elders in engaging with them. That’s what I am going to talk about today.

Some brief examples of Suzuki Elder involvement with youth:

2011 – present: involved in various ongoing individual mentoring/support shared with range of youth colleagues.

2012 – present: Suzuki Elders attend annual youth conferences and events in Vancouver and Richmond as speakers, guests, workshop leaders. (Richmond Ready Summits, VSB Sustainability Conferences, Triple C District Wide Student Environment Conference.)

2013: Elder Youth Environment Forum. (EYE)

2014: Suzuki Elder Retreat with youth guests panel/dialogue: “*Elders and Youth - listening to each other.*”

2014/15: Intergenerational *Playing Without Plastic* Project with Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House .

2014/15: Youth-led initiative to write, film and produce the Elder Story Project YouTube Video.

2015/16: Intergenerational Storytelling Project workshops.

2015: *“Lose the Plastic”* intergenerational event with Sustainable SFU.

2015/16: Workshops/focus groups with Catching the Spirit Youth Society, Metro Vancouver Youth Sustainability Network.

2015 - present: Suzuki Elder storytelling sessions at Camp Suzuki.

2018: Suzuki Elder Salon - “*How to Talk to Younger People about Climate Change*.”

2019: Suzuki Elder Salon – “*Generations Rising: Inspiring Climate Action.”*

I also point out that when we elders began our work with youth, Greta Thunberg was only 8 yrs old! It is over the past year, in particular, that we see the worldwide growth in the involvement of young people in the climate action/climate justice movement. The pot has been simmering for a long time, and is now coming to a boil. We know that the young 16 year olds we worked with in 2013 are 22 years old today, getting degrees in environmental studies and resource management and continuing with their activism. Certainly they are moving from recycling projects in their high school years to direct action in their 20’s.

**I’m first going to tell you the rationale behind our work with youth, and our learnings. Then will share some of the stories we’ve heard from youth, and from adults/parents/teachers.**

Two brief quotes to start. Hold these in your hearts and minds as you listen this morning.

Recently one of our Elders told us that her grandson, age 11, responded to her suggestion that they talk about climate change by saying “*not right now Grandma*” – with a tear running down his cheek.

Then this from a young person attending our Elder Youth Environment conference...back in 2013! *”I am actually scared about the future, scared we won’t have enough time to fix this...but when I attend events like this conference I get hopeful..”*

**So, Suzuki Elders ask ourselves**: "What is **our** reason for working with youth on any given project or initiative?” Does it fit with our purpose to motivate, encourage and support?

When working with youth we quell our own personal desires to be heard out there in the public world because in this case we are not looking for the podium for ourselves, we are reaching out to bridge the generational divide. If we are audacious enough to think we should speak on behalf of children and youth, we question what our motivation is in doing so. Is it because we can sometimes reach an audience they cannot? Is that useful? And does what we say reflect how youth actually feel?

Our Suzuki Elder work with youth is to mentor, support, and encourage. We remind ourselves that as elders we are not their (school) teachers, we are not their parents, in most cases we are not even their grandparents. We don’t teach, we don’t direct, we don’t chastise, we don’t even hold out expectations.

As we were reminded by a young man at one of our planning sessions who emphatically said “I *want a way to think about things rather than what to think.”*

We remind ourselves of the truism that no one can empower anyone else. People can only empower themselves. What we can do as elders is help create opportunities for youth to empower themselves.

We’ve learned that our work with youth is not about us, it is about them. What elders bring to the table is our story and our ability to reflect on and describe what we usually call “the long view”.

We’ve learned that youth do want to hear our stories – about our lives and what we’ve done – and those long view reflections. We’ve learned that these stories are best shared in some activity and context. For example, when organizing a workshop together we don’t say how something should be done, instead we might tell an *“I remember when...”* story. Teachable moments are not always obvious. In fact, perhaps the best teachable moments are the ones we never realized were teachable.

We’ve learned that youth can be fearless in the way we were fearless when we were younger. It is powerful stuff.

Here are some examples taken from panels, workshops, events where youth spoke freely to us about their concerns.

*“In terms of doing something about the environment I thought, If not me, who else will do it?`` By Grade 10 I was going to rallies, doing flash mobs. Then I began to realize how important politics is to change. I got involved in a youth action group and made a film on climate action.”*

The youth we’ve worked with on environment and sustainability matters are bright and quick. They know a lot about the topics and from angles that often differ from ours. Outside the box thinking! It is exciting to go there with them. Here are some examples:

*“I have always found the root of the problems of the world as the environment. I want people to see the inter-relationship of social justice and the environment.``*

*“I think that environmentalism needs to be seen as necessary and enriching, not just a duty. Unless we think of it that way there’ll be just a small group of people working on it.”*

*``I think there’s a stigma around the term environmentalism – I prefer the term sustainability.”*

And, we are mindful of our different realities because of age.

*“I don’t want to go to workshops where someone stands up and talks for an hour and then I have to go home and remember what was said. I want to talk, to interact, to have some hands on experience...to be able to go home with some tangible learning.*

*“The future is mine.....not yours”*

We’ve also learned that dealing with hope, fear and despair play a part in this. The youth we engage with on environment and sustainability always want to talk about hope. We find that closing any discussions, conferences, workshops and talks on a theme of practical hopefulness is more likely to lead to action, personal commitment, as well as to gaining a sense of comfort and inclusion.

Fears emerge further on, sometimes with gentle prompting. The times when youth confide their fears about the future to us are important and moving moments of discussion.

*“I feel hopeful when i see lots of people marching in the street – makes me know there are others working on this and makes me feel less along.``*

*“My fears are that the issues will disempower us”*

*”I feel like we, the youth of today, have lots of worries already. Adding one other worry regarding the environment is an extra – and youth don’t have the personal resources to deal with that extra worry.``*

Indeed, just like adults, some youth do not have the resources to deal with extra worries, or their resources are fragile. We know of young people depressed about the future, some even in despair. This concerns us deeply and made us review the way we, as Suzuki Elders, talk with youth about the environment, sustainability, adaptation and the way ahead. We know reality must be acknowledged, that we cannot paint a rosy picture of the future. While we believe it is an elder’s responsibility to speak truth, we frame these discussions in a way that does not leave people, especially the young, without hope. One of our elders aid recently – *“It is not so much about what we say, but how well we listen to youth.”*  Another noted that *“by our own example we show there is hopefulness in action*.”

We’ve learned that when it comes to knowing what moves us forward and what holds us back, youth and elders share similar thoughts. An interesting part of our workshops with youth is when listening them to describe how their fears and hopes about sustainability both move them forward ,and/or hold them back. **Listen to what youth told us about what holds them back** from acting on their concerns and see what resonates for you:

*``The realization that I’m the only trying to change something in the world.``*

*``The unwillingness of others to help out.``*

*``Seeing other people not doing anything.``*

*``Age- not being taken seriously.``*

*``Doubting how much I can do as an individual.``*

*``Inaction by leaders.``*

*``Fear of no support and no results.``*

*``Worry that I don’t have enough passion.``*

*``My own lack of time, distractions, social pressure to thrive in the economy and spending all my time making my own life better. ``*

And here’s what youth told us about what **helps move them forward into action.**

*“Hope, being inspired, my own growing awareness.``*

*`` For the rest of my life I want all animals to exist and not become extinct.``*

*``A desire to see humanity live on after I’m gone.``*

*``Seeing other youth doing things – super peers.``*

*``Seeing pollution and environmental problems for myself, seeing the effects on others``.*

*``The possibility of creating sustainable systems.``*

I have to say that these comments from youth are no different from my own motivations! A generation gap? Not so much.

**What do these youth and we elders get from our intergenerational environmental work?**

**For youth**: Because Suzuki Elders ask youth for their perspective, working with us has provided them with an opportunity to practice, to test themselves, to show leadership, to get on the podium, to *shine*. Because we have worked with them we are able, when asked, to provide letters of reference. Perhaps most importantly, youth know we will listen and hear them...and that we have their backs.

**For Suzuki Elders**: We are reminded of the richness and privilege of working with the younger generation. They open our eyes to new perspectives particularly around environmental justice. Our knowledge and skills are valued by them and this valuation is as important for we elders as it is for youth. The tech support youth share with us is needed! Finally, and this is no small thing, from the commitment and curiousity of youth we elders receive infusions of hope and inspiration.

All of us here today know that our personal actions can be wide ranging, from remembering our cloth bag at the grocery store to civil disobedience. The climate change we are now experiencing is big, so big, overwhelming. We elders also know from our life experience in other movements – peace, anti-poverty, occupy, civil rights, women’s, antinuclear – that every effort counts, be it small or large, individual or collective. All of it matters. So when people older and younger ask *“What is enough...how do we make change...we are too small...no one else is interested...how can my small voice make a difference?”,* whatwe say, especially to youth, is that *“every day, we each do what we can, small or large on that day, to move the environmental and sustainability agenda forward.”*

That is the first part of my narrative this morning – our rationale, what Suzuki Elders have learned from working with youth.

**Now I will share stories that arose out of research we elders did when planning a salon on “*Talking to Younger People about Climate Change”.***

When interviewing adults and some of the younger people we’d been working with we asked what they could tell us about how they learned about climate change, and how they’ve talked to their own kids about climate change. Here’s some of what they said.

**We asked the younger ones ``what’s been your experience of being a  younger person asking an older person about climate change?``**  (*For example, did you ask someone directly first....or did your query or wondering arise in everyday conversation...or were you prompted by something being talked about at school?  Or did climate change arise out of another topic completely?   (perhaps all of the above!)  and….WHO was that person you asked…..? parent, older friend, teacher, relative,*

One student said (and this is fairly typical): “It was first of all in 7th grade, a teacher – and it wasn’t climate change, it was environment in general – how to take care of the place where you live – home, school. We learned about recycling. I started a trash pickup program at school. We had a (younger) teacher who was very keen, taught us advocacy, ways to be active – including writing the principal!!! I think she antagonized other teachers by doing this! This was all ‘entry level’ environmental awareness. I will add that *now* we’re trying to shift student learning of resource conservation earlier – I say to the younger students today “You are starting at a place further along the continuum than we did.” They tell me *“I am trying to make by school vegan one day a week....tying to stop kids from getting a ride to school.”* I see younger students, now, doing the metrics, getting the numbers down.``

Another student said: “Climate change (as a topic) came later, at high school, through the environment club. In the 9th grade, Vancouver School Board got some tickets for reps from our school at go to a three day sustainability conference at UBC. That is where I met students from other schools who were doing things like organizing to have clean water foundations re-installed at our school. In 10th grade, knowing that climate change was an issue, we began to do something about changing behaviour (consumption) and attitudes (transit) – and asking ‘*what difference can WE make*?” We did not yet talk about the impacts of climate.``

Another example: ``When we were trying to get water fountains re-installed in our school I got involved with upper management in Vancouver School Board – the associate superintendents, the Director of Instruction and Director of Facilities. They would say “no, it can’t be done” and we’d say “why” over and over again. When we finally got their answers “costs too much” etc, we then went and fundraised and put down $3000 on the table to help make it happen. With our Parent Group (PAC) we raised the funds to help make it happen. Now, these days, it is run of the mill to see students raising funds and getting grants to take on this kind of work.``

And a student told us how she took her early high school activist learnings further on into the public world. ”I learned more about how hard it is to advocate on these issues when I went out into the larger community of adults etc, For example, I met with my MLA a number of times and she and I never aligned with our politics on this. I won her scholarship award for political work but we never connected on environment. Our enviro club watched the Kids 4 Climate Action group get locked out of their MLA’s office when asking to talk about coal port issues. That’s when we knew we had to learn what to do when that kind of thing happened to us. We all took on Port Metro over coal, then Northern Gateway.``

**A second question we asked of youth was this: Thinking back to when you were first becoming aware of climate change and its implications,  what kind of information/encouragement/advice/ do you now wish you had received from adults around you.**

``I wish I`d heard that adults care. What we could actually do about it concretely in our everyday life. ``

``I wish I had been told more about what I can do in my own life in a more significant matter, more than individual actions like recycling and riding my bike to school. I wish climate change and environmental issues in general were framed not just as an enormous global issue that need collaboration with everyone, but also that it needs collaboration and community at the local level.``

``I wish that more people recognized that working for environmental, economic and social issues to deal with climate change was a valid and respectable way to dedicate one’s life work to.``

`` I wish that I had received more advice on not just the direct actions we need to take, but also on the personal fortitude, resilience, empathy and care that we need to take on climate change.``

**We also asked young people to describe,** **based on their experience**, **what one or two key pieces of advice they had for adults about what they should think about when engaging in conversation with their children/younger people about climate change***.  (For example, considering the fears/concerns/hopes/anxiety a child/younger person might express explicitly, or subtly.) Their responses are insightful.*

``Share with compassion, said one. With empathy about how horrifying it is to learn about. Have some actions ready for what young people can do.``

``Looking back, it (what we heard from teachers) was never about doom and gloom – the news everyday is about doom and gloom – we get that message there. For us, for young people, the message has to be about “*what are we going to do about it?”* We don’t even need the science at a young age – it can be simplified down. For example, it would be better to say *“if and when climate change kicks in we might not be able to feed everybody – so how do we change that - - what will that look like*?” For example – an adult might say *“eating less meat makes a difference – so let’s do meal planning together*..” We don’t need to produce more cynics, we need more progressiveness in moving the issue forward. How can we do small stuff day to day to make a difference, and then we move into the larger stuff. Like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs - - Maslow’s hierarchy of action!``

``Now I am doing policy work in my university studies, and in my activist work at City Hall and with VSB. I don’t dwell on what’s going wrong, I look at what we can do because that is where hope comes from.``

``Don’t assume kids have no power, nor that they won’t or can’t understand. Explain something so that it can be understood , but don’t dumb it down. Make it so that we will understand. Help us learn how political folks ARE going to bat for us, and how to support them, learn who will champion us. AND, don’t assume that where young people are at is lower than where they could actually be.``

**Here are some stories from adults we talked with about how they talk with their own younger family members about climate change.**

***This first story is from a woman who works in the environment field. She is an indigenous person and brings that perspective to bear in conversations with her children.***

“My children and I always talk about climate change but if you ever asked them, they would probably not even realize that that's what I am teaching them. My two youngest children are ages 11 and 13, so they are old enough to process information about their responsibilities to Mother Earth. I admit that I rarely use words like "climate change" to my children. I prefer to use terms like *"our relationship with,* or, "*our responsibilities towards" Mother Earth*. To me that language is important, because it doesn't allow a person to feel privilege or entitlement. It clearly defines our role as caretakers of the land; an interdependent and inter-connected symbiotic relationship with the Earth

***This parent remembers his two daughters when they were younger – and their different responses to his activism. The story speaks to the importance of we adults being aware of what we say “out loud” and how the varying personalities of our younger people need to be taken into account.***

“Our problem has always been to avoid our rants of frustration in front of the children – and we learned this when we tried to get one of our daughters interested in doing something at school.  I think she was about 8 or 9 and she replied "*why should I do anything*?"  We were shocked and asked why and she *said "I know what you and Mommy say.  It's too late*."  She had watched her older sister who was always galvanized to do something, but she only heard our frustration and felt disempowered by it.  I'll tell you, their mother and I were shocked and ashamed that we had loaded this on a child.  We vowed never again to talk about these issues in front of the children unless we were talking about what can be done about them.”

***These two parents describe how they responded to the first questions they had from their 11/12 year olds and one five yr old.***

“In recent years my kids have shown worry. They watch the wildfires and ask if it is about climate change - - it is concerning to them. I say “yes it is, and this is why we need to do (and I describe some actions) ...how do you feel about that?” And then I listen to them.”

“I showed my five year old son the starving polar bear video. I tried to explain to him why it was like that. I asked, "What do you think we could do?" He said,’ *put notes on our neighbour’s cars to tell them to drive less and help the polar bears’.* I showed him the video about the impact of plastic straws on the turtles! We decided we'd live without plastic straws so at home we have stainless steel ones. I don't tell him we need to save the world or anything. We talk about how it's sad and then I ask, what do you think WE could do. I do struggle with placing so much emphasis on this since he's a little kid. I don't want him to get too depressed or think he needs to do all the fixing, yet our household does hold certain values and he's learning about why. ``

**Another parent said clearly, in response to our query about whether climate change matters can frighten children:**

“I think It is overblown that we can frighten people with these conversations. Being falsely gentle is not a good idea. Instead, I say “*this is the problem, and here’s where we need to go with it.”* Tailoring stories can be problematic, kids don’t like to be played with. I’ve learned that one of the beautiful things about the developmental level of children is that they can only process what they can process – at whatever age they are at. I think any good conversation should explore, explain. Start with what is right there and go with your thought. It should not be a lecture.``

**He went on: ``**Challenge their current level of understanding with slightly more complex issues to help them grow. Show them examples in the real world like changes in weather patterns, dykes along flood plains etc. Watch documentaries on Netflix or DVDs from the library on various issues such as the significant effect of the meat and dairy industry on global warming etc.``

**Another made this point: ``** Try not to demonize certain industries. Tell them about the shifting scene over time, and that people were not aware of the impact on the environment before. Now that we do have the information, we need to act. On the other hand also be truthful about the companies etc. You can talk about what Exxon did – it is documented, and they continue to do it and this is not good. The company needs to take responsibility and we can push them. I say to them that humans do have the ability to NOT take action – you have to be encouraged to act – ourselves, and others.”

**Three themes emerged from our research.**

**Theme No. 1:** Climate change is a topic that can make children feel fearful and anxious, but it is possible to reduce their fears and anxieties*.*

**Theme No. 2:** Adults often find conversations about climate change difficult and uncomfortable, but there is an increasing amount of advice to help them to do a good job.

The literature on this points out 5 strategies: Emphasize action. Connect with nature. Talk about animals. Get involved in community. Make it a lifelong lesson. Messages need to be positive and highlight opportunities to engage in activities to address the challenges of climate change. Fearful messages often fail. Climate change should be portrayed as a human issue with many human strengths and weaknesses.

**Theme No. 3:** Children’s developmental levels vary, but work has been done on age-appropriate messages about climate change and the environment.

It is important to ensure that messages are ‘age-appropriate’ – simple concrete examples for the young and more abstract and complex ideas for older children. For children aged 2-5 we should focus on our homes within a nature context.For children aged 6-9 we can extend the focus to show how what we do in our homes can affect nature and how nature can affect our homes.For children aged 10 to 12 we can further extend the thinking to address the theme that the climate changing and that they can change as well.

The responses from the survey we undertook for this salon provide useful insights about two facets of climate change conversations with younger people:

(1) deciding what you are going to say (that’s the CONTENT) and

(2) deciding how you are going to say it (that’s the DELIVERY METHOD).

Looking first at **the Content of the conversation– what you say**

* Use facts, e.g., local events – flooding, fires
* Use feelings, e.g., optimism about value of personal changes
* Use stories, e.g., examples of three stories given above
* Use encouragement/support, e.g., pointing out the value of individual actions to reduce carbon footprint
* Use questions, e.g., Could you ride your bicycle to the park rather than ask your parents to drive you there?
* Use ‘What if” statements, e.g., What if we tried to make some small changes at home that would mean that our family uses less electricity?
* Use ideas about action, e.g., Would you like to try wearing a warmer sweater rather than turning up the thermostat when you are at home?

Then there is **the Delivery Method – how you say it.**

* The main factor that comes up in the literature is the age of the younger person because of the importance of age-appropriate messages.
* Also factors are the relationship to the person, there would likely be a difference between how a parent and how a science teacher would address the topic and the venue in which the conversation takes place, especially the differences between a one-on-one conversation at home as opposed to a classroom discussion.
* A final factor that can have a bearing on the conversation is the personality of the young person – ranging from self-confident and positive to shy and pessimistic.

There are also factors that affect how the conversation is delivered by the older person, which can reflect in part the person’s personality and background. For example, you could be influenced by your personal feelings, your political perspectives! Your skills in openly questioning and honestly assessing an issue are key here. These include empathy and sensing what sort of a response is being sought, listening to really hear what the younger person is saying and your/our ability to let go of personal stances as well as cross-cultural sensitivities.

Here some suggested guidelines we developed.

**”Talking with younger people about climate change” – Suggested Guidelines.**

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| --- | --- |
| **CONTENT (what you say) can consist of:** | **DELIVERY METHOD (how you say it) is shaped by:** |
| Facts/knowledge  Heart/feelings  Stories/insights  Encouragement/support  Questions to ask, share  Wonderings/’what if?’  Ideas about action, “What **we** can do...What **can** we do?” | **Relationship** you have with the person (teacher, parent, relative, friend, leader, mentor) |
| **Developmental age of younger person** (what are they able to take in/understand, developmental changes over time) |
| **Personality type of the younger person** (naturally fearful? Sensitive? Activist orientation? Problem solver? Curious? ) |
| **Venue** (family dining table, school, camp, on a walk, classroom project, doing a public speech) |
| **Our own personal feelings** about the issue. (guilt, sadness, positivist, cynical, hopeful, fearful) |
| **Our own political stance** on the issue. **(right, left, centrist, good people/bad people or black/white world view.)** |
| **Recognition/knowledge of cultural origins** of younger people we are talking with. |
| Our own ability **to be open to questioning ourselves and the world around us.** |
| Our own ability **to appropriately ask questions of younger people (and probe as necessary).** |
| Our own ability **to be honest,** and **transparent in saying what we personally) know and don’t know.** |
| Our own ability **to sense when comfort is needed and to provide it.** |
| Our own ability **to listen....and listen some more.** |
| Our own ability **to know when to stop talking – to let go.** |

**In closing, I pass on two wise insights - one from a parent and one from a younger person.**

**The first is from a very grounded and practical parent.**

*“My advice – cook dinner and sit down at the dinner table and talk to each other – about everything. Go for walks, get together with friends and neighbours. Just be together and see what comes up. Don’t start with climate change on the agenda per se. Listen. Maybe do an interview with your kids “what do you think of....” and start from there. And above all.......listen to them.”*

**And this from a student who provided what we think is a mind-blowingly mature and thoughtful comment***: "Don't assume kids have no power, nor that they won’t or can’t understand. Explain something so that it CAN be understood, but don’t dumb it down. Make it so that we will understand*. AND *Don’t just tell us the issues, the challenges and the problems that the world faces and that it is on us to fix it somehow. (And here’s what blew us away) Teach us to be strong, resilient, caring and thoughtful in the face of these mountains, and to be better people for a better world. Teach us what we need to do, but also teach with us who we need to be.”*

So –those are the stories and narratives I leave you with today. Things for you to think on as you move forward in your own worlds of children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and friends.

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Vancouver BC

[www.suzukielders.org](http://www.suzukielders.org)