

# Opinion: Why kids can be leaders and send powerful messages

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Image 1. Malala Yousafzai talks to more than 6,000 people at ICC Sydney Theatre in December 2018, in Sydney, Australia. Yousafzai is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate. Photo: James D. Morgan/Getty Images for The Growth Faculty

A senator from California met with a group of people from her district recently. Her name is Dianne Feinstein. The meeting was far from a routine visit with voters, however. The visitors were mostly children, from third grade to high school.

They carried a large handwritten letter asking the senator to vote "yes" for the Green New Deal. It is a plan to slow climate change or global warming, the heating up of Earth's climate.

"That resolution will not pass the Senate," Feinstein, a Democrat, said. She pointed to the high cost of the program and the lack of Republican support. "I know what can pass, and I know what can't pass."

The video of the meeting became popular online, prompting a range of reactions, with some accusing adults of using children as political tools. However, others called Feinstein "rude" and

"dismissive." The senator responded that she heard the children and remains "committed to doing everything I can to enact real, meaningful climate change legislation."

Children often call on us to do better, inspiring us by example to speak up or join a cause.

### **Children Can Sway Public Opinion**

Clayborne Carson is the director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. He believes the Children's Crusade, the 1963 children's march in Birmingham, Alabama, turned the tide of the civil rights movement.

Police officers responded to the children as if they were adults. However, "pictures of the bravery and determination of the Birmingham children as they faced the brutal fire hoses and vicious police dogs were splashed on the front pages of newspapers all across America, and helped turn the tide of public opinion," says Marian Wright Edelman. She is the founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund.



### **Getting Honest Answers To Tough Questions**

What gives children the moral authority and boldness to take action for causes? Feinstein's meeting shows that children's voices can sometimes get people to talk more directly about concerns. While some children might simply be following the lead of adults, those who work with children know that kids often ask tough questions and want honest answers.

The honesty and sincerity of children's questions and actions have a strong appeal. I have heard kindergartners gasp when I tell them about Malala Yousafzai's campaign for global education and that girls do not go to school in many parts of the world.

There is also the commitment of kids. It's rarely even possible for adults. Most adults have daily duties, lacking the time and energy that author Phillip Hoose says are critical to youthful success.

Young people can truly devote themselves to their commitments of marching or rounding up followers. In the process, they are often able to reach grown-ups who can bring change. In his book "It's Our World, Too!" Hoose also points to the importance of young activists' firmly defined senses of right and wrong, as well as the power of being underestimated and the availability of school as a place to organize.

### **Kids Take On Climate Change**

Children, especially by their teenage years, also display bravery in the face of risk, which is often boosted by their frustration with being under the rules of adults. The title of Hoose's book comes from an 11-year-old boy's words. He was told he could not sign a petition to stop the spread of nuclear weapons because he was too young. "It's our world, too!" the boy said, and he started a petition for kids.

Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg initiated school strikes last year calling for action to stop global warming. Her commitment, time and energy, as well as the truth of her arguments, brought

attention to her cause. She sat outside the parliament building in Stockholm, Sweden, every day for three weeks. Thousands of young supporters staged school strikes in Germany, France, Britain, Belgium and Australia.

Amy Neugebauer is the founder of Giving Square, a youth charity organization based in Montgomery County, Maryland. She said Feinstein missed an opportunity with the children "to engage them around why they believe what they do."

Environmentalist Bill McKibben said in The New Yorker magazine that Feinstein had gracious moments with the children. However, she showed "why climate change exemplifies an issue on which older people should listen to the young. Because, to put it bluntly, older generations will be dead before the worst of it hits," he said.



### **"They Will Make Us Think"**

The Internet plays a role in the reach of children's voices. Young adults have organized protests on Twitter and other social media.

Emma González and her fellow students from Parkland, Florida, worked to get attention for their #NeverAgain response to the deadly shooting at their school. She quickly built a Twitter following of 1.2 million.

Yousafzai was shot as a teen in Pakistan by the Taliban for her support of girls' education. She has rallied supporters worldwide because of her honesty and determination to change the world.

Young people relate to Malala because of her age. However, it is also because she speaks with the authority of one willing to risk danger to continue speaking.

"Listen to kids, their ideas, their concerns," Neugebauer said, "because they will make us think and make us better people."

*Karen Leggett is a freelance journalist and children's book author living in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her nonfiction picture books include "Hands Around the Library: Protecting Egypt's Treasured Books" (2012) and "Malala Yousafzai: Warrior with Words" (2019).*