



Black Rep 4 Kids Stories for Climate Preparedness



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BlackRep4Kids

Guide & Toolkit for Storyworld Creators

January 25, 2025

Knology



Introduction

In 2023, Knology received funding from the National Science Foundation for a project called **“Black Representation: Authoring STEM Stories for Climate Risk Preparedness”** (BlackRep4Kids). Seeking to address the underrepresentation of Black voices in climate science media for children, the project brought together professionals from a variety of fields to develop strategies for creating media to help Black families and their children discuss, prepare for, and respond to a multitude of environmental threats. Moving away from victimizing climate change stories that focus almost exclusively on Black pain and suffering, the project presented hope as a pathway to building climate preparedness, empowering young minds by centering Black joy, Black knowledge, Black solutions, Black belonging, and Black dreams.

Over the course of two years, project partners built a community of practice dedicated to improving the representation of Black voices, characters, and stories in children's climate media. Members of the project's leadership and advisory teams contributed to a podcast series designed to build awareness of the knowledge, skills, and cultural contexts required to create quality climate-related media for Black children. Resources shared and discussed during podcast episodes (including academic studies, project reports, educational guides, news articles, organizational materials, and examples of children's media) supported the construction of a publicly accessible resource library designed to aid the creation of inclusive and impactful climate-centered STEM stories for young Black audiences.

All of these activities provided a foundation for the project's centerpiece: an unconference held in October 2024. Across two days of meetings and conversation, 80 experts from a variety of fields (including climate science, developmental psychology, informal learning, and children's media) collectively brainstormed practical, actionable solutions to the problem of Black underrepresentation in children's climate media. The unconference's goal was to identify ideas, themes, and strategies to inform the design of climate-based STEM storyworlds in which Black characters live and breathe. By sharing their knowledge and pooling together their different perspectives and experiences, participants collaborated on the development of culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate solutions to advance STEM-informed climate awareness, adaptation, mitigation, and resiliency among Black families and young Black children.

During the unconference, participants collectively generated a **Guide & Toolkit for Storyworld Creators**. This document is a representation of group discussions that occurred during the BlackRep4Kids unconference and do not reflect any one individual or organization's thoughts. Serving as the unconference's proceedings, the toolkit synthesizes key ideas and themes that emerged from the group's deliberations, provocations, and continued collaboration. The toolkit also builds on key points from the project's pre-conference outputs – most notably, the BlackRep4Kids podcast series and resource library.

Through use of the toolkit, readers can carry the project's work into the wider world and enable contributions to ongoing efforts authoring stories that include climate adaptation, mitigation, and resilience efforts within Black communities.

Shared Beliefs & Guiding Principles



The Unconference affirmed the following shared beliefs and guiding principles:

We keep Black joy in sight of all that we do. As adults, we can learn from children to center our own joy. Joy is diverse and can co-exist alongside troubles.

We are part of a long line of generations: we spoke about the Black and Brown children we once were, what we've learned from our Black and Brown and Indigenous ancestors, and what we envision for today's and tomorrow's Black and Brown children.

We keep us safe; we make us strong; we lift us up. Harambee (pulling together) is the key.

Humility and curiosity are cornerstones of (climate) justice: we need to listen to the people who are most impacted and use our power to uplift them and help realize their aspirations.



As artists and creators, we have to build our own systems that work for us: we have to create spaces where we can be committed to service, care, and art, and we can do that by building teams that help us navigate systems that are hostile to those goals. (For example, trustworthy lawyers and agents can help us respond to contracts that don't want our art to succeed.)

You do not have to be a scientist. You do not have to be a policymaker. You can be a parent, an artist, or a reflection of whatever your passion is. You can be any or all of those things and still be a climate and environment champion.

Nature is everywhere. Nature includes community gardens, city parks, backyards, the sky, terraces full of planters, the woods, and the one precious ocean that connects us all. Black and Brown children belong in all of them.

We are the global majority.



The future we want for Black children & families



We own our homes and our land.

We're comfortable with the animals and plants in our area, and we can identify them and their uses and how to live with them.

The air smells fresh, not smoky or smoggy. There's music and flow and a lot of laughter and a lot of sunshine.

We have access to parks and playgrounds everywhere we go.

Our children aren't exposed to violence and death.

We feel comfortable taking up space and welcomed into new places where we haven't been yet.

We receive good medical care from the moment we're conceived until the moment we pass through to whatever's next.

Our air is clean and safe and plentiful. Our water is clean and safe and plentiful. Our food is clean, and safe, and plentiful. Our homes are clean and safe. Our neighborhoods are clean and safe.

We are safe. That means we're free to learn and be happy in that laughter and smell that crisp fresh air and be able to go out in the world and know that you can be great and do great things.

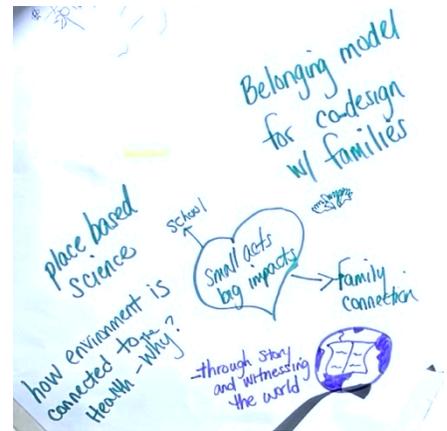
The world loves us.



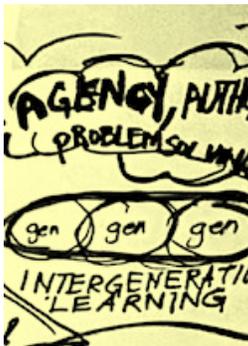
Practical Guidance

What Children Need to Hear and See

- Children are the leaders of right now. Ask them how they would solve problems. Don't wait for them to grow up.
- Empower children with small but impactful steps that they can take and model for their peers.
- Introduce children to nature as early as possible and show them that nature is everywhere.
- Let children be who they are. See the genius in what they are doing, don't channel it into what we want them to do.
- Hopeful endings are more real and powerful than happy ones.
- Let children's voices lead. That might be uncomfortable for us as adults, but it's powerful.
- Use tangible and local examples. (For example, ask children to find birds that are common everywhere—are they easy to find locally? If not, why not?)
- Find opportunities for children to co-design our work. Children know what they need and want.



Speak to Parents Too



- Create curriculum guides for educators and parents to build on your work with children.
- Research notes for parents and child-friendly definitions extend the value of books.
- Encourage adults to experience nature for themselves.



Tips for Working with Educators

- You might not know what's developmentally appropriate at what age. Ask an expert at your local children's museum, library, or school district!
- One way to extend learning from stories is to make connections with local programming and curricula. Formal and informal educators can be strong partners in this work.
- The NJ Climate Education Hub has resources and lesson plans at all levels; the *US National Climate Assessment #5* has region-specific resources tied to different state standards.

Strategies for Financial Freedom

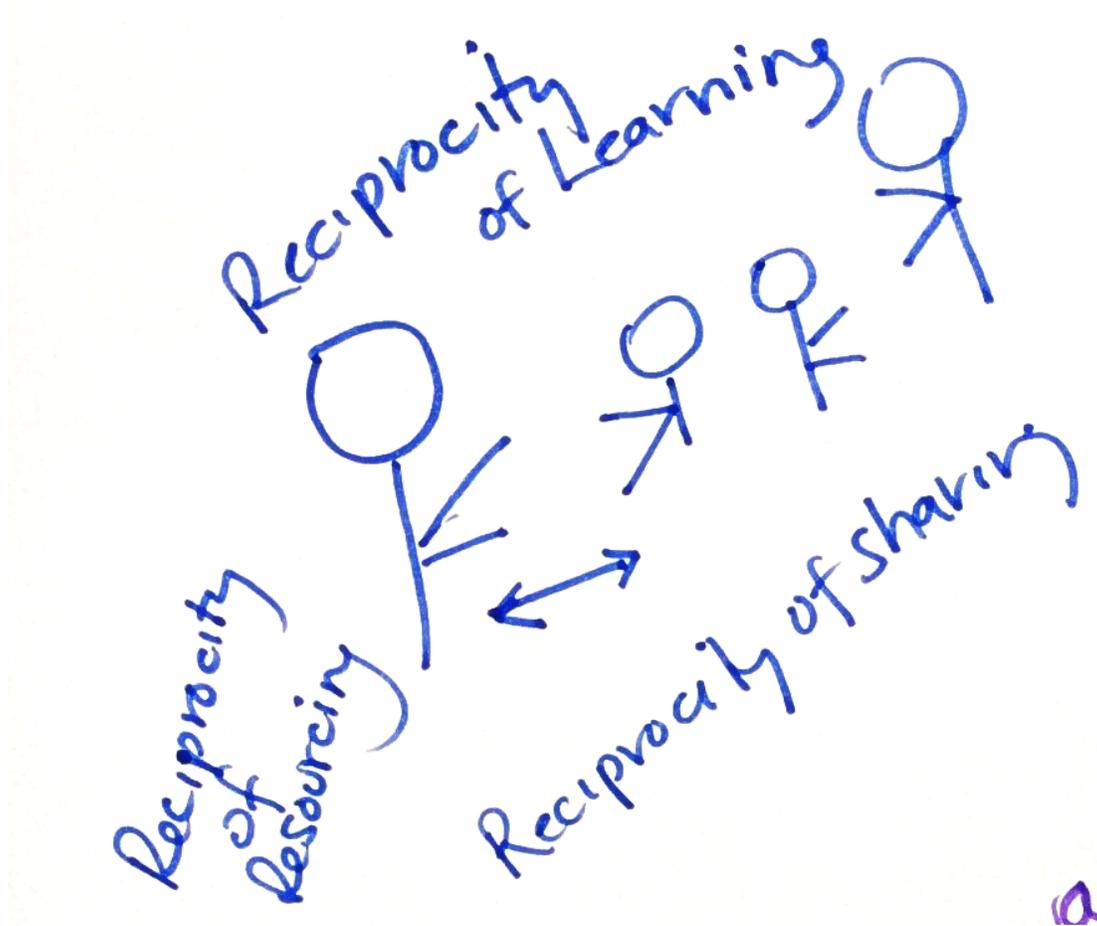
- Build a trusted team. Lawyers and agents have a role to play. If you're an artist, learn what directors and animators do. If you're a writer, learn what illustrators do. You don't have to do it all, but you have to understand it well enough to collaborate.
- Network and collaborate. Participants recommended the Children's Media Association and Women in Animation, as well as the Algorithmic Justice League for questions around generative AI.



- Learn the business of art and conduct yourself like a business. Take advantage of copyright.gov. Get comfortable enough with copyright and trademark law to ask hard questions. Before you share your beloved brainchildren with a potential partner or sponsor, get NDAs in place. Read their contracts in full and settle in to push back.
- Build a brand and maintain control of it – licensing can be a powerful source of revenue.
- Don't expect all your revenue to come from one place. Have a day job; build relationships that bring in freelance and work-for-hire projects; look into grants and multiple revenue streams; Kickstarter can be a way to find sponsorship; find mission-aligned corporations that will sponsor events.
- Build power. If you're hiring writers and artists, pay them fairly. Get allies into positions where they can ensure that writers and artists are paid fairly.



Build Your Community



- Reach out to libraries, children's museums, and schools about creating programs. These institutions want to meet your community's needs.
- Reach out to influencers who work on topics related to your stories.
- Build an email list and reach out to people regularly about your stories and mission.
- Listen to your community. They have good reasons to be afraid of nature, and we need to honor those reasons in our work.



What our Allies in Other Fields Can Do

- ***Build new publishing models and pathways.*** Museums have artists-in-residence. What if libraries invited children's-authors-in-residence from the community? What if libraries and publishing houses created training programs to expand who's represented among publishing decision-makers?
- ***Advocate for more books with Black and Brown characters.*** Libraries, schools, museums, and any other institution that purchases children's books can help make our case. Invite us to offer programs about our books.
- ***Invite Black and Brown children into your spaces.*** Rules and norms tell us implicitly who does or doesn't belong in a space. (For example, White Americans express appreciation through silence; Black Americans express it through backchanneling and call and response.) Set rules that invite us to be who we are.
- ***Create structures where educators can make the most of these stories.*** Work with schools and districts to make curricular alignment explicit. Elevate educators' voices to speak to one another, because they can speak to the small and tangible actions with the most impact. Support educators in learning to cultivate psychological safety and trust.



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