Young people's voices in the climate crisis

PSYCHOLOGY WEEK 2019
REPORT SUMMARY

There is global acknowledgement that climate change is an urgent threat to current and future generations and the planet.[1] Children and young people are among the most vulnerable to its impacts.[2] They have a right to know about and take action on issues concerning their current and future welfare.[3] Climate change is an issue that many young people are worried about and which deeply concerns their future lives. Having the opportunity to share and act on their concerns about climate change can boost young people's self-efficacy, hopefulness and resilience, while dismissing their feelings and denying or ignoring the climate crisis can negatively impact their wellbeing.[2,4,5]

Young people are leading the way in demanding urgent action on the climate crisis. They can also be strong advocates in engaging their families, friends, teachers and other community members in climate change discourse and action.[6,7]

As part of Psychology Week, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) reviewed the research literature on the climate crisis in relation to children and youth, and established a Social Justice Youth Advisory Group to hear young people's opinions directly. A total of 60 young people were part of this group. A closed Facebook group was formed and contained 34 active members who engaged in discussions initiated by APS staff and two peer facilitators. In addition, 14 young people aged 16-24 (including nine people from the Facebook group) participated in up to two workshops at the APS National Office, and 12 young people in secondary-school grades 8-11 with a refugee background discussed the issues at their schools with project members in two different sessions. Seven of the young people also volunteered to take part in filming video messages about their views on social justice.

A set of recommendations emerging from both the literature review and the voices of the young people are presented in this report. Download the full report here.

Australian research[8-12] indicates

95%
of Australian youth believe that climate change is a serious problem
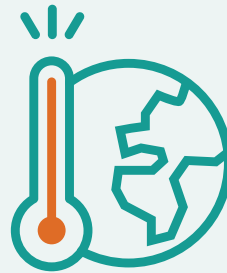
4 in **5**
youth are anxious about climate change

4 in **5**
youth are concerned that climate change will reduce their quality of life in the future

1 in **6**
ZZZ...
youth have reported losing sleep due to worry about climate change

3 in **4**
youth feel that young people's opinions and concerns are not being taken seriously

Recommendations

Young people

To help manage their deep feelings about the climate crisis, it is important that young people talk about their concerns with family, friends, teachers and other trusted people in their networks – including what they know about the crisis and how they feel about it.

To build a sense of self-efficacy, realistic hope and to increase the likelihood of environmentally friendly behaviour, we recommend young people:

- think and talk about how knowledge about climate change and/or experience of its impacts affects them personally and is likely to affect their future lives
- take action as an individual (e.g., changing their own consumer behaviours, writing about climate change for a newsletter, writing a letter to a politician, attending a rally)
- think of creative and fun ways to address the issue with friends
- join a group that is working on the issue
- celebrate small wins (e.g., reducing waste at school, convincing friends to use keep cups)
- focus on self-care when needed (e.g., take time out, spend time in nature, switch-off from media).

Parents and other caregivers

Many parents and other caregivers (e.g., grandparents) worry about how the climate crisis will affect their children's future. Communication, modelling and action around climate change can make young people feel empowered and help them cope with distressing feelings about climate change.[2, 5]

To help young people build their self-efficacy and motivation to engage in positive environmental behaviours, we recommend parents and other caregivers:

- encourage children from a young age to care about 'bigger than self' issues such as the environment, social justice and climate change
- listen to their concerns and acknowledge that they are reasonable and understandable
- be positive role models to children by showing concern about climate change and acting in accordance with their beliefs
- as a family, find out more about climate change and engage in fun and effective actions to address the issue
- support their children if they choose to be actively engaged in addressing social justice and climate change issues.

> **Listen and be open to (young people's) ideas – they've got passion, energy and some good solutions!**
> **female, 24**

Education providers

Many young people report that they do not have opportunities to learn systematically about the climate crisis, nor about how individuals and communities can help address it at school or in tertiary education. Education is critical for informing and supporting children around climate change. We therefore recommend that the climate crisis (along with other social justice issues) is included throughout the education curriculum to help build young people's knowledge, self-efficacy, social responsibility and pro-environmental awareness. In particular, we recommend that education providers:

- cover climate change (including causes, impacts and solutions) systematically in core subjects
- establish, recognise and support school student 'climate teams' to take a lead in pro-environmental activities to mitigate climate change
- support the notion that it is 'cool to care' about climate issues with children of all ages, genders and backgrounds
- provide information about the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on different communities (e.g., Indigenous Australians) and developing countries and help students design projects to help those impacted most by climate change
- review teacher training about the climate crisis
- incorporate climate change topics in media education programs so young people can become media savvy in distinguishing climate science stories from opinions and misinformation.

Community and media

Children and young people have both a right and a capacity to be involved in community action around issues they care about.[3, 4] When young people are shown that community-wide changes are possible, they can overcome pessimism and increase their belief in the efficacy of their own actions. Therefore, to help build young people's self-efficacy, realistic hope and capacity to be global citizens, we recommend community members:

- support the belief that that it is 'cool to care' and actively involve young people in community efforts to mitigate climate change (e.g., volunteer groups)
- sponsor or provide scholarship opportunities to support young people's active involvement in climate change activities
- utilise creative arts to communicate about climate change and involve young people in their production
- support and publicise local businesses that have adopted environmentally friendly policies and practices

> **I have changed a lot of my personal use products to avoid plastic and I am also trying to become an environment officer with my university's union.**
>
> **female, 25**

- provide role models relevant to young people of diverse genders and backgrounds (e.g., male role models from the sporting community to encourage young men to care about climate issues).

We also recommend that there is greater representation of young people across all forms of media (including social media) and recognise the legitimacy of young people's concerns (e.g., treat climate change as a science rather than as a belief or opinion).

Governments

In order to protect the wellbeing of current and future generations of children and young people, as well as the broader community, we recommend that Federal, State and local governments develop and adapt policies that involve:

- taking urgent action to protect the environment for current and future generations
- supporting marginalised groups (e.g., Indigenous Australians, migrant populations) and developing countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change
- funding the development of national curricula on climate change, which include both the science of climate change and solutions to it[1]
- declaring a climate crisis, which can also help governments in educating the community about the nature of the crisis and the need to move from 'business as usual'.

"This issue will impact every aspect of our lives as adults.
male, 17

Psychology research, teaching and practice

There are many roles for psychology trained professionals in addressing climate change. They can play an important role in advocating for action on climate change and educating decision-makers, colleagues and the public about the many psychological factors associated with the climate crisis. Further, there is an important role for psychologists in helping people cope with the deep feelings aroused by the climate crisis. More research is needed on the psychosocial benefits of engaging young people with the climate crisis and on how best to support young people who are confronting climate impacts in different contexts.

We make the following recommendations to those involved in psychology research, teaching and/or practice:

Research

- Work with non-government organisations, United Nations agencies and other national and international bodies to investigate how children and youth in different contexts and backgrounds (e.g., Indigenous Australians) are impacted by climate change and how they can best be supported.

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1   This is consistent with the Paris Agreement and other global and local recommendations as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.[1,3,13]

- Collaborate with climate scientists to highlight the role of psychology in the mitigation and adaptation of climate change.
- Develop, test and disseminate programs to support young people, parents, teachers and others in addressing the climate crisis.
- Engage young people in research projects on climate impacts (e.g., through youth advisory groups, or as part of project teams) to help build self-efficacy and resilience.

Practice

- Consider the possibility of climate change being a contributor to symptoms of stress and anxiety in presenting clients, and address this in therapeutic practice.
- Provide information and psychological support/interventions to young people and their parents on climate change (e.g., on climate change distress, coping with extreme weather events, attitude and behaviour change, realistic hope).
- Develop and deliver workshops for teachers, parents and young people about coping with climate change.

Teaching

- Develop, use and share curriculum material on psychological aspects of the climate crisis for inclusion in undergraduate and postgraduate psychology curricula.
- Help incorporate psychological aspects of the climate crisis in curriculum materials for preschool, primary and secondary schools.

> **Provide support services and information for young people to navigate the challenges that might arise from the challenges that we're facing because it can be quite intense and quite stressful**
>
> **female, 23**

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