

ACP Statement on the Climate & Environmental Emergency & its Impact on Children and Young People

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Climate change and ecological degradation pose unprecedented threats to the planet on which we depend. The consequences for the health and mental health of humans everywhere are increasingly clear. Unicef (2021) estimates that 1 billion children will be affected by climate change. In the UK flooding and air pollution impact on the long-term mental health of infants, children and young people, who are also impacted by deterioration in the mental health of their parents and carers. Young people also suffer from profound and overlooked anxiety and depression about their futures and the failure of the adult world to take appropriate action. Current and future generations of children will bear the burden unless action is taken immediately. The Association of Child Psychotherapists is calling for international cooperation and urgent action by declaring a climate and ecological emergency.

Voices of Children and Young people:

From a 2021 global survey of 10,000 young people aged 16-25:

- 80% of young people are worried about the climate emergency
- 40% experience despair, anger, grief, depression
- 75% feel the future is frightening 56% feel humanity is doomed
- 60% feel governments are failing young people 40% fear having children due to the climate emergency (Marks et al., 2021)

From a BBC (2020) survey of children aged 8-16:

- 3 out of 4 are worried about climate change
- 1 in 5 have had a bad dream about it

“It’s normal for us now to grow up in a world where there will be no polar bears, that’s just how it is for us now, it’s different than it was for you”. (10-year-old in UK)

“The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say – we will never forgive you.” (Greta Thunberg, UN Climate Summit, New York, 23 September 2019)

“I have a pretty good understanding of how fragile the ecosystem is... We’re in the sixth mass extinction at the moment of the Anthropocene epoch. Everything is incredibly fragile and I feel like the most likely occurrence, in my mind, is that we drive ourselves as a species to extinction and take a whole lot of other stuff with us. I think that’s going to happen and yet in my everyday life it doesn’t bother me so much. It drives me sometimes. I act upon it...I don’t know how vain an attempt it is to stop it. I have made peace with the destruction of ourselves. I used to dwell on it a lot in high school. I guess I got used to it.” (Australian university student)

Key Messages:

1. Climate and ecological degradation pose unprecedented threats to the planet on which we depend and to the physical and mental wellbeing of humans everywhere.

2. The threats to current and future generations of children and young people are particularly acute and often overlooked.
3. The Association of Child Psychotherapists is declaring a climate emergency, joining with many other professions and organisations in order to highlight the need for immediate action to address these issues.
4. Humans are part of the natural world and have a responsibility to protect the creatures and habitats that make up its ecosystems.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic underlines that our physical and mental health is intimately connected with the state of the natural world. It also shows how, when an emergency arises that we cannot avoid, affluent societies can prove collectively capable of mobilising the political and economic resources required quickly and at scale.
6. While climate change and biodiversity loss pose dire threats, our responses to them can contribute significantly to a healthier, more equitable and more peaceful world.
7. Climate change and biodiversity loss are global emergencies that need to be addressed at international, national and local levels. The ACP acknowledges the unequal contributions to the problem made by different communities within countries and by the global north and south, and that climate justice requires wholesale changes to be made to the systems that brought this about.
8. Whilst the impact will be greatest on poorest communities in the poorest nations, the impact is happening now on many parts of the UK and in the poorest communities most of all. Children, young people, infants and families in the UK are directly impacted by flooding emergencies, air pollution, and high levels of anxiety and depression about their futures and the failure of governments to adequately address the emergency.
9. As mental health professionals working with children and young people in the UK's National Health Service and other contexts, the ACP can contribute to understanding the impact on the mental health of current and future generations of children and young people.
10. This includes the recognition that anxiety and depression are appropriate responses to the emergency and will be alleviated by action to mitigate it, as well as support from those involved in the care of children and young people.
11. The ACP can also contribute to psychoanalytic understanding of what drives this human-made disaster, what is needed to facilitate clear thinking despite high levels of anxiety; what can help us to face unpalatable realities, and what makes it possible for individuals to act, both in making changes in their personal lives and as citizens pressing for change (For example, Weintrobe, 2021 and Hickman, 2020).
12. We acknowledge that it is hard to take sufficient steps to address these painful issues. The literature and also our own experience indicate that solutions are found through joining with others, working to establish clear grounds for realistic hope and taking action.
13. This statement provides:
 - basis for collaboration and shared action with other organisations committed to children's and young people's wellbeing
 - a position statement from which a programme of action will be developed, drawing on the following aims.
14. The ACP aims to:
 - continue to develop understanding of the relationship between climate change, biodiversity loss and the mental health of children and young people, for example through its Working Group on Climate Change, its scientific programme, and through developing a way for members to share their clinical experience, and to collate and develop research

- join with other professionals and organisations, especially those working in mental health and in the care of children and families, to further this work and its application in health services
- support the work of the NHS plans across the UK to reach net zero
- contribute to the creation of sustainable mental health services, including a focus on prevention as a preferable approach, and also a lower carbon route to better mental health for all; this includes high quality support for children and families at an early stage in their lives and better detection and treatment of illness at an early stage
- support the full recognition of the social determinants of health including mental health; as well as climate change and biodiversity, these include factors such as adverse childhood experiences, poverty, poor working conditions and housing. For healthy development children need well-supported parents and carers, access to clean air, nutritious food, excellent education and health services and access to green spaces
- support the recognition of the impact of social prejudices and structures, including racism, as a factor in tackling climate change and loss of biodiversity, and in the development of young people
- further reduce its carbon footprint to net zero by 2025 and ensure its reserves are invested ethically and sustainably.

References:

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The ACP is the professional body and accredited register for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists in the UK. We have been working to improve the mental health of infants, children, young people and families since 1949