

# Interview with Sally Weintrobe

Jane Turner interviews Sally Weintrobe on children, climate change and nature for the ACP.



Sally is a psychoanalyst who writes and talks on how to understand what underlies our widespread disavowal of the climate crisis. Particularly due to Covid, the environment has come to the fore in a way that less than two years ago we couldn't have imagined possible. What does this mean for our work going forward?

**JT:** Sally, our initial discussions in the autumn of 2020 impacted on my delivery of a seminar I taught about the young child. I talked about the young child's relationship with nature, the earth and wildlife and I shared video examples of this, which was well received.

**SW:** That's great to hear, Jane. I'm grateful to you and the Association of Child Psychotherapists for this invitation to talk about children in relation to the climate crisis.

**JT:** My first question: the climate change movement has particularly evoked responses from children compared to any other campaigns in history as far as I can remember. I wonder why you think this is?

**SW:** It is true children have been campaigning hard for action on the climate crisis. However, I hesitate to make big statements about possible causes. Perhaps if I give some history of this movement and its context, it may help to frame your question.

'Fridays For Future', the global protest movement for action on climate, as many will know was inspired by Greta Thunberg who famously in 2018 went on strike from school on Fridays, sitting alone opposite the Swedish Parliament holding a banner that said, Skolestrejck For Klimatet.

2018 is also the year Extinction Rebellion (XR) was declared. I see Greta's protest as part of a wider uprising that includes different groups, (such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Idle No More (Native Americans protesting against lawless

despoiling of their lands). All these groups currently lack political power and representation, and while each has its unique history of struggle, all were protesting against violence against their members. XR named the issue as a rebellion against extinction of life. It placed the climate crisis centre stage as well as that 60% of all wild animals have been lost globally in just the last fifty years.

Greta Thunberg's lone protest outside the Swedish Parliament inspired thousands of schoolchildren to strike for climate right across the world. Many young people had understood they were to be the 'zone of sacrifice' – a euphemism for violence – required to maintain current political and economic power arrangements. They refused to have the violence normalised. They knew that decisions to pursue fossil

fuelled 'business as usual' were being made at the expense of their lives and of life itself.

In this context, to return to your question, I suggest several factors may have been – and may still be – at play. Children, being in a generally much more dependent situation than adults, and learning how little power they have, are likely to be more closely in touch with the terror of what it means to be highly dependent while at the same time being exposed to a shocking lack of care or thought about their future. Margaret Rustin made this point about children being closer to their dependencies and exposed to frightening anxieties in a discussion paper in (2012) in *Engaging with Climate Change*.

Then, children are likely to feel closer to the plight of animals than adults. They have not yet so 'successfully' split off animals as separate from and 'inferior' to humans (modernist westernised culture relentlessly portrays animals as 'beneath' humans). Children love animals openly and unashamedly. For instance, a five-year-old girl I know sent her first Valentine's card to the dog in the family. Young children tend to inhabit a world 'peopled' by people and animals, feeling empathy for both. They do not make the more usual adult distinctions in their affections and allegiances. They become very upset when they learn, for instance, that polar bears are suffering and dying in the Arctic because of climate change.

Children are also closer to acting than symbolising (Klein used this as part of her rationale for play therapy). Very often, children on hearing about the environmental and climate emergency, want to act. They organise bake offs for Greenpeace, and so on. The Czech dissident and writer Vaclav Havel wrote that in his view there exists what he called the 'pre-political' world of the child, a world in which children are not yet so heavily influenced by culture and group pressure to disavow truth.

For Havel, the pre-political is deeply political. It is the source of the child's natural sense of ethics and understanding of what is fair and unfair. I believe we have much to learn from children about how to live in a kinder way, and we can find buried within ourselves our inner child who still thinks and feels about other species as children do.

Up until now I have not distinguished between children of different ages, who view the world differently. I am an adult not a child analyst and therefore make my next point with caution as it is based on my everyday knowledge of children and the child in myself. It is my experience that by the age of about seven children know full well that they exist within already formed social frameworks and culture.

They can see that their parents may be in a bubble of disavowal about the climate

emergency. They appreciate that adults are subject to social group pressures to conform, remain silent and resist change. Sometimes children ask tentative questions of the adults in their world to draw them out of their bubble; tentative because often children have, through repeated experience, lost expectation of actually being heard and taken seriously by adults about their environmental concerns.

One example is a child aged 8 who said to her parent, "Mummy, school told us today that the world is going to end because of climate change". Mummy replied, that's ridiculous! Not something to worry about. She changed the subject. Mummy here may have been accurate in a strict sense, but she was also indicating this subject was taboo.

And she failed to see that her child may well have been anxious and in need of understanding and support. I believe within our culture that still – less so now – maintains silence about climate change, children are being regularly emotionally abandoned by their parents and left alone with their anxieties. Which can be terrifying. Another example, this time from a six-year-old: "Granny, it's true, isn't it, that my generation will not have things so good as yours did by the time I grow up?"

The question is heart-breaking, any honest answer is difficult for the adult, potentially arousing anxiety and guilt. Truth from the mouths of babes. A group of psychoanalysts including Gilbert Kliman and others have just produced a book on how to talk to children about the current state of the world. They do not mince their words, saying we need to listen to the children far more, and be willing to say they have not been told the truth about climate and other, linked, social crises.

In this situation, and perhaps especially when aided by information from school and on social media, children will naturally look for and may find support for their concerns from other children. It is well known that an antidote to trauma inducing circumstances is group support and positive action. They may well also venerate leaders like Greta.

Given this context, I will describe my experience of having attended several large 'Fridays for Future' demonstrations. I felt awkward about attending demos organised by children – it was their gig - yet I also felt it important to support them. So, along with some other adults offering support, I stood to the side with a banner saying, "Grandmother supporting your action".

On one big demonstration in Parliament Square in 2019 many things struck me. How difficult it was to even find where the demo was, I think because the children were so much savvier than an oldie like me, and seemed to be involved in their own communication channels on social media, responding swiftly to messaging. Most were between about 15 and 17, although

some were under ten, there with parents. Many of the younger children held hand written and painted placards.

The teenagers spoke to the crowd, each stepping up on the podium in turn, one after another, each brief and to the point, most saying something like. "I am 16 and a pupil at X School. I am here today because nothing is being done about the climate crisis. My Head Teacher supports my action". Or, "I am 15 and am on strike today to protest inaction on the climate crisis. There is no time to lose. My school does not support my action." I was touched to see fear and apprehension before they spoke give way to pride on their young faces as they stepped off the podium. One spoke out, "When we leave here today, we will pick up every bit of litter and take it home with us". And they did. These children and burgeoning young adults were not like a Glastonbury crowd. One girl who looked about 12 came up to thank me for being there.

Many children now clearly understand what is at stake for them if emissions are not drastically reduced and very fast. They are refusing to be the ones to be sacrificed. Current economic arrangements leave them no entitlement to a future. I will say that again, as it is hard to take it in. Current economic arrangements leave our children with no entitlement to a future. Given that children do not have the vote, protest is their main expression of collective power.

**JT: Turning to another theme, you have highlighted how often when babies are born, they are bought soft animal toys, and I wondered what you thought this might represent in the parent's mind? and why we might do this?**

**SW:** As you say, mothers so often introduce animal toys into their baby's nursery world: wild, farmyard and domestic animals, on curtains, mobiles above baby and in the cot. I wouldn't want to speculate on what mix of cultural (including commercial) pressure and possibly more primordial unconscious imperatives drive this behaviour.

However, I find it interesting that the first 'world' – the nursery world – that many babies will encounter includes primary human care givers (especially mother or mother figure) and animals. It was Klein who talked about the 'representational world', a world gradually constructed through both projecting phantasy onto external reality and introjecting external reality, in this way modifying phantasy and building up the representational world. Klein was clear that thinking develops through apprehending external and internal reality.

The common idea that she was only concerned with internal reality is a misconception. However, she did essentially use the term 'world' to mean a

world of human relationships. By and large, animals in Klein's representational world are taken to stand for, to represent, people, part people, selves, part selves, or feelings about or qualities of people (fierce tigers, wild wolves, naughty monkeys and so on, seen as projections onto animals). Animals tend not to be granted full status as animals per se in Klein's representational world. Here I suggest we can see a basic split established between the human animal and other animals. To repeat the point, while Klein did recognise the importance of the external world, she mostly confined this world to the social human world. This strand in her thinking would be creatively extended to understanding group behaviour and it is accepted by now that 'world' can include the social world existing beyond the immediate small group context (the family, the therapy room and so on).

If we accept that humans are animals, might we not also extend Klein's concept of 'world' to include the non-human world? In stretching Klein's representational world in this way, I believe we gain a fuller, more representational, picture of 'world', without distorting her profound contribution. 'World' would include nature, especially the parts of nature that babies immediately seek out to engage with: animals with faces and eyes whom they are immediately drawn to relate to as an expression of their life instinct.

And, we know that particularly in westernised cultures babies and small children are drawn to the non-human and they think about the non-human in different ways to adults. For instance, their thinking is animistic. Do mothers intuitively and wisely know to meet their babies and children right where they are, with their ecological selves still intact and not yet split off? Fascinatingly this could also mean that mothers and care givers respond from their own ecological sensibility, joining in with the world of their baby and child by sharing in a way of thinking that grants animals their full place in the world.

It seems to me a shame that the concept of 'world' has tended to be restricted to 'essentially only the human world matters' in psychoanalytic thinking. When we take it to mean the whole world, it opens up interesting questions and possible developments in theory.

For example, we know that humans from babyhood project into as well as onto their objects. This is the basis for Bion's theory of container-contained. Currently, we concede that humans project onto animals in all kinds of ways. What if they also project into certain animals? This would mean that certain animals can receive their projections. When I think of therapy dogs, or even the family dog, this is not fanciful. It might also explain why the family dog is such a comfort to many and why a little five-year-old might send her first valentine's card to the dog.

So, I am arguing for the representational world to include animals as primary irreducible figures of phantasy. Also, nature. It strikes me that the mother provides her baby with a tiny version of the world, the world of the cot, and within that world we find animals (or as one child I know put it, 'non-human persons'). I am suggesting that mothers respond with unconscious knowledge to their awareness that babies and children do not make the discriminations that adults make. Rather, they see many living creatures as having sentience. Indeed, they even treat the inanimate as animate. As an example, I heard a small child say on a commuter train when it stopped, "Mummy why has the train stopped? Is it doing a poo poo?" We may notice the age appropriate 'anality' of this query, and the projection, but do we also notice the animistic underlying world view that this question entails?

Westernised mothers seem to be unconsciously relating to their babies and their children in terms of a world view not yet fractured by adult prejudice in which animals are inferior to people. In the way I am seeing the 'nursery world of representation', all animals are 'on common ground' as it were with all humans, and baby and mother are animals too. There are many interesting potential questions (I have no answers) that might arise from the practice of mothers creating a miniature nest, an envelope, a safe space for their babies that includes objects from nature. My working hypothesis is that it may be part of largely unconscious work to develop in the baby - and to repair in the mother - the ecological self.

**JT: Yes, when we work in the room with a child within our child psychotherapy work, we might often consider that animals within the play are seen as part objects, or as representing internal feelings as depicted for example in the book *Where the wild things are* by Maurice Sendak. The animals represent primitive wild feelings in the imagination, which get evoked in this case during separation and helping to contain and make sense of an experience of the dark. But in hearing you, you question whether we think enough about the importance of the actual relationships with animals for children in early life, and the idea that they are primary objects for the child.**

**SW:** Yes indeed, but I would say primary objects as well as containing the child's projections. It seems to me that it is potentially unnecessarily restrictive to see the child's representation of an animal in a dream, or its use of an animal in play only in the metaphorical sense as standing in for human figures or for feelings, wild or otherwise. Might we not be fostering the

building up of a closed off world in the mind of the therapist inside of which we are deaf to material the child may bring that actually refers to plants, animals and so on.

If we do not foreclose on what the material might be about, processing the material actually involves more and deeper work not less and more surface work. It is harder to try to disentangle material sufficiently to have a hope of discovering whether the patient's point of urgency (Strachey) in the session concerns anxieties about external or internal reality. This work also includes psychic work on one's own anxieties and the struggle to take in current damage to the ecology; it includes the struggle to become what is now being referred to as 'climate aware'. Perhaps it is easier, like that mother who said to her child, 'I do not hear your worry about the climate emergency. This is the subject we should be talking about'.

Just as white therapists can be colour blind in not appreciating that a brown skinned patient faces very different realities that they want heard, so therapists can be eco blind, not appreciating anxieties that children may be experiencing much more acutely than they do, because in real terms the children know the climate emergency will affect them more drastically, and the fate of the animals also affected touches them more closely. I suspect that material about climate may only rarely come in a form that is unadulterated, 'pure', and not mixed in with individual phantasy. The mind tends to form chains of interwoven associations, and external shocks become linked to memories of internal shocks. It does not follow from that that we can ignore the external shocks - especially these days - as if they are not primary traumatising agents.

**JT: You have also described how, as adults, we perhaps find it hard to connect to and even be authentic and open about our relationships with animals, and our relationship to the earth and nature, in the context of our fear of being humiliated. We deny the importance of these relationships - because actually in truth we are so very dependent on the earth, nature and these relationships.**

**SW:** Absolutely. In discussing this with friends, they - we - voice shame and humiliation at openly acknowledging our felt connections with nature and with the non-human. Trees are often mentioned. One friend said she would feel humiliated if anyone saw her going up to and touching a tree, but that is what she can find she wants to do as she passes a tree. Actually touching the tree in public feels strictly taboo. If she is honest, she sees trees not as backdrop in the park but as venerable beings providing deep comfort, solace and strength. I see these conversations as part of the work of inner repair, and also repair of our culture of uncaring that so devalues



nature. Another friend told me how moved she was when her small toddler grandson saw the moon and whispered 'moon' in awe. He said moon with an entirely different inflection in his voice.

**JT: You have described how it is so difficult for parents to have conversations with their children about climate change....you have given the example of adults denying their children's fears when asked whether the earth/life is being destroyed, saying "of course not". You have pointed to the difficulty for us as therapists if we are unable also to think about climate change, or struggle to face the reality of it in our own lives. The question is are we able to notice when this becomes a concern for a child in the therapy room or do we turn a blind eye?**

**SW:** You have raised such an important subject. I know from psychologists and therapists working in this area that adolescents and young adults are increasingly asking to see only therapists who are what is now being called 'climate aware'. This means therapists who not only know about the climate crisis intellectually (knowledge that 'fits' more easily with disavowal or turning a blind eye), but have taken in that knowledge at a feeling level. Doing so can lead at times to feeling overwhelmed.

As we know, much of the therapeutic process happens through projective identification. Unless the therapist is climate aware, meaning that they have struggled themselves in a feeling-ful way to face what the environmental emergency actually means, at times no doubt finding themselves overwhelmed by anxiety, grief, rage and guilt, indeed perhaps traumatised by confronting that by now because of inaction the climate is increasingly unstable (these are usual feelings people report when they step out of the climate bubble of disavowal), they are unlikely to understand the kinds of fears their young patients are bringing. They are unlikely to be able to struggle with the difficult task of trying to separate out which strands of the verbal or play material belong to concerns about external reality, which belong to factors iatrogenic to the child, and, crucially, how both may be involved.

As we know, trauma about the external world reignites internal traumas. We turn a blind eye to the child's lonely suffering if we ignore external realities preoccupying them or if our therapeutic model reduces all the child's material to metaphors about their internal object relations. May we not then be in danger of creating a kind of psychic retreat for ourselves in which we feel protected from our own existential climate anxiety while abandoning our patients? If children feel ignored by their parents about their climate anxieties – very common in our

culture – might we not be retraumatising them if we similarly ignore them?

Struggling to become climate aware makes one in my view a therapist capable of working at a deeper, albeit more perplexing, level. Often the reverse is thought to be true, in other words there is commonly the idea that to interpret the external world means to ignore the internal world. I believe that now, given the complex interwoven anxieties people face if they are in touch with external and internal realities, we need to resist being into either/or binary thinking of this kind, and acknowledge our uncertainties about how to interpret material. Our task is made even harder if we face climate reality ourselves, not least because that breaks down a convenient boundary that we can place between the child patient (indeed any patient) and the therapist, a boundary primarily designed unconsciously as a defence against facing the unbearable.

I have come to think that in today's world it is possible, very broadly speaking, to distinguish between two sorts of anxiety that can feel unbearable. The first kind we as therapists are more familiar with in our work. It is anxiety that comes from feeling and being unheld, unattached and unbearably alone: exploding into bits, falling endlessly into space. This anxiety, felt more by some than others, is part of human fragility. It is unavoidable and part of being alive. We can use illusion to create a bridge to step over that kind of anxiety as Freud showed with the Fort Da game.

However, in our modern world today we face a different sort of anxiety about the security of our planet, our very home, and about its viability to sustain us and life itself. This anxiety is realistic, and because the current political system is steadily tipping our environment out of balance. The climate crisis is driving a mental health crisis as we struggle to contain this new level of existential threat.

We are fragile in the face of both these sorts of anxiety and can easily feel overwhelmed in relation to each. The two might be put as we fear our own death and we also fear the death of everything. We can see the complexity in understanding clinical material that this can produce in revisiting Hanna Segal's point about the nuclear issue. She said for the first time ever in history we can make our most destructive phantasies come true in reality. This is a very serious psychic breach indeed.

Klein raised that primitive early anxiety is about inner hostility and destructiveness. That destructiveness and damage is now visible in the external world is likely to be profoundly alarming for the small child. And, in the family setting or the therapy setting it does not do simply to pretend the world is safe or to invite the child into a bubble that disavows the danger and the violence. Children are good at seeing lies.

Here is an example from a study into children's phantasies about climate change (Hickman, 2018). One boy responded to the question how is he feeling about climate change by drawing a series of pictures of bombs exploding. How might we read this (of course from the sidelines, and I bring it only to raise the sorts of questions clinicians might face today)? One could argue this child is in an uncontained state, or by contrast one could say that he has managed to contain his feelings sufficiently both by drawing them and so giving them a bounded shape, and perhaps also by wanting to reach someone who might understand his feelings.

In Bion's terms, the drawing might be a link in this sense, in other words it might be the child's attempt to communicate with a part of himself that can contain the inner explosion, or with another person who can receive it and contain it and thus potentially help him through that. Then, for instance, we would need to consider the repetitive nature of the drawings. Is it a trauma reaction and if so, how might we locate the trauma?

I believe the climate and environmental emergency has made our work far harder as it introduces further complexity into an already complex picture. I believe the only way we will have a hope of finding points of urgency from which we might make interpretations is in the actual relationship with the therapist, with the quality of that relationship affected by how receptive the therapist is to responding to anxieties in the child, bearing in mind that the child may well be much more in touch with external reality than we are.

My conclusion: we must listen to the children, and be prepared to have our hearts broken. We may well expose ourselves then to feeling guilty. The example of the child who stated her opportunities will not be as good as her grandparents' comes back to mind here. How might we engage with that child and if we fail to is it partly because we are paralysed into silence by underlying guilt? Isn't it the least we can do to struggle to work that guilt through so we can keep engaging?

I am also saying that we face similar psychic work with the children in our lives as with child patients. How to be honest and non-defensive? How to stay in depressive mode and not slip into paranoid mode where we feel we will be blamed by the next generation? I was very moved by the sight of a mother holding her teenage daughter as her daughter wept uncontrollably at a moment on Westminster Bridge during the Extinction Rebellion occupation in autumn 2018. I was not only moved but impressed by the mother who rather than trying to avoid the pain was there to help by sharing and being a witness to the situation and her daughter's pain, and offering comfort. Her imperative

was empathy, not concern about how much she had contributed to the climate problem (or, that is what I saw in the situation, and took from it for myself).

There is much difficulty to face in our technique and use of theory if we are to relate openly and honestly to the times we are in. However, there is also so much of interest to explore and assistance we can give as therapists, given what we know about the psyche and about anxiety. It is my experience that many people are crying out for help to manage the traumatic times we are living in.

To be available to children, one needs to stop thinking of 'climate' and 'environment' as something 'out there and far away from me' and to realise that many of our child patients see the situation differently to us. It is their future at stake. Many of us oldies especially in the global north are ignoring the problem and unconsciously leaving it for children to bear, choosing to turn the blind eye to their realistic distress about climate. Even thinking in terms of 'a crisis in the future' is a defence. Climate is

unravelling now. The generations are in the same boat even if facing different storms here and around the world.

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## Biographies

**Sally Weintrobe** is a Fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society and she chairs the International Psychoanalytic Association's Climate Committee. Her new book is (2021) *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare*.

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Jane met Sally Weintrobe in her role as a Trustee for the Harry Guntrip Trust. The Harry Guntrip Trust is based in Yorkshire and one of its main aims is to increase psychoanalytic thinking and therapy in Yorkshire through events and offers bursaries to those training within Yorkshire. For more information see:

<https://harryguntriptrust.co.uk>