



CLIMATE SCIENCE

Supporting children with eco-anxiety



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Last year we introduced a climate science section to our newsletter. So far we have included teaching resources and ideas for cross-curricular approaches to support children's engagement with climate science. In this issue our focus is climate psychology and eco-anxiety.

The psychological effects of the climate and biodiversity crisis are increasingly well understood and the resulting impact on children's mental health is now well established (Burke et al., 2018; Trott, 2020; Clayton, 2020). Children's eco-anxiety can manifest itself in a range of ways including depression and anxiety, sleep disorders and phobias, all of which can adversely affect happiness, engagement and achievement at school. Teachers have an important role to play in helping children acknowledge and deal with their feelings about the climate crisis. This is not an easy task and many teachers may feel ill-equipped to do this. PSTT has been working with the Climate Psychology Alliance to develop resources and training to support primary teachers to provide appropriate and effective help for children dealing with eco-anxiety.



Ruth Shallcross, Regional Mentor for PSTT, has interviewed Caroline Hickman from the Climate Psychology Alliance. We share some of this conversation here, with grateful thanks to Caroline for her insights and advice for primary teachers about how they might support children with eco-anxiety.

Ruth: What is climate psychology?

Caroline: Climate psychology is about supporting people with anxiety about the climate emergency not to become overwhelmed. We need to accept rather than deny reality so that we take action. It's not too late to take action but it is urgent. It's what I term 'both and' – as it's both terrible and there are actions we can take.

Climate psychology is also about eco-psychology – about looking at the relationship between the individual and the planet. It's about healing the split between humans and nature. We've become disconnected from and lost sight of our dependency on the natural world. Humanity needs to be reconciled with our interdependency on nature and understand that what we do to the planet will impact on us.

Ruth: What is eco-anxiety?

Caroline: Eco-anxiety is something that has come into wider public consciousness recently, but it's important to recognise that it's been around for decades. It used to be primarily felt by conservationists, by environmentalists, by scientists working in the environmental field who were aware of the increasing magnitude of the problems that we are facing. They were speaking out but, in spite of the science, were witnessing a lack of action.



Now what we're seeing is eco-anxiety coming into broad public awareness as the climate emergency accelerates. It's an emotionally healthy response to the reality of what we're facing in the environment. I would worry about people that are not emotionally responding to what is going on. Anxiety is often the first emotional response to threat. Our feelings of vulnerability lead to anxiety. Then the anxiety will often traverse into feelings of depression, despair, panic, anger, rage, guilt or grief. It can move into those other emotional responses and then full circle again.

Currently I'm trying to reframe eco-anxiety as eco-empathy because you only feel eco-anxiety if you care about the state of the world. It shows that you're connected, you care about the plight of the planet as well as humanity. That's empathy. That's compassion. Eco-anxiety can be reframed in a positive way by saying that anxiety is a gateway to feeling eco-empathy, eco-compassion and eco-concern.



Ruth: Should we protect young children from the scientific evidence about the climate crisis?

Caroline: I think we have to start by asking, 'What does it mean to protect children?' As a psychotherapist and social work lecturer, my professional life is about the importance of protecting children from harm.

So what does it mean to protect children today, given the changes that we're facing collectively as humanity? To conceal frightening facts from young children is now the opposite of protection. In fact, I think that's now an abandonment and betrayal of the children's need to be informed educationally, emotionally and relationally about their changing world. If we don't give them this information, what we're doing is we're setting up a terrible schism or split in terms of children's mental health because we're lying to them. We're telling them the world is one way while the evidence in the world tells them it's the other way. Children are aware – they're online, they're seeing news and TV programmes, they're finding out for themselves.

Ruth: Why are we seeing a rise in eco-anxiety amongst young people?

Caroline: There is a rise in eco-anxiety in young people because they are very connected; they care, they're informed and they're exposed to media. In all forms of media there are messages about the devastation of the planet. Young people are starting to see the immediate impact of the climate emergency.

When I was talking to a 10 year-old, I clearly wasn't communicating to him properly that I understood his perspective. He got quite cross with me, quite rightly. He said, "Caroline, you don't understand. For me, I've grown up as a 10 year-old with no expectation other than polar bears will be extinct. That's my normal. I've grown up knowing this. You had decades of enjoying polar bears as part of the ecosystem." I had to say to him, "You're right. It's really hard for me to understand that. I didn't have that normal. This is your normal."



I've heard this from older teenagers as well, that they've grown up with this awareness. They never had space in life to imagine anything else. I think what we've got to do is imagine and empathise what it's like for young people to grow up with this knowledge that this is their normal.

Ruth: How do we support young people with these difficult emotions?

Caroline: We need to acknowledge and show understanding for the difficult feelings they are experiencing because they're growing up in this world, their normal. As adults we need to say sorry and then say how do we find solutions? Children need to see adults modelling how to tolerate difficult feelings and not collapse.

We also need to allow them to release their feelings of frustration, anger and despair that they may be feeling because they're growing up in this world. We have to really emotionally meet them, because what we all need is to be seen, to be heard, to be understood, then we don't feel alone. We should not be leaving children to feel alone with this.



Ruth: How should teachers approach eco-anxiety in schools?

Caroline: Teachers need to communicate a clear message that it's OK to feel this way. It's also OK if you're not feeling this way. It's important to overtly give children permission to feel whatever it is they're feeling, to show that there is space for feelings in the classroom. As adults we can guide children to understand that those feelings don't need to dominate, but they also shouldn't be excluded from the classroom.

When introducing the climate emergency to children, I would always distance it slightly by talking about the climate crisis or the impact on animals – whales or bees, for example. ***I would never begin by asking children how they feel about the climate crisis.*** These are huge emotions to process. We need to build up to that point.

Incorporating talking about feelings into the daily classroom culture helps it become part of the school day, and to become ordinary and embedded. This allows children to become tuned in with themselves and verbalise – I feel angry/sad/joyful. If it's a session once a week, nobody's going to want to talk about feelings then. This is about building emotional intelligence in these children.

Teachers can use various techniques - games, stories, models, puppets, drama and art - to give children permission to feel and have a place for feelings in their education. For example, children can draw their feelings.

Ruth: Can you give an example of a 'both and' in your own response to the climate emergency?

Caroline: An example of my 'both and' would be about both feeling hope and despair. I have hope. I'm an optimist. I am inspired by what a lot of youth activists are doing. Simultaneously, there are times I connect with my despair about what we've done and what we've lost. Both those feelings, emotional responses are really important. I want to feel both because both are real, both are true.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Burke, S., Sanson, A. and Van Hoorn, J. (2018) The Psychological Effects of Climate Change on Children, *Current Psychiatry Reports* 20 (35), Springer

Clayton, S. (2020) Climate anxiety: Psychological responses to climate change, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 74

Taylor, M. and Murray, J. (2020) *Overwhelming and terrifying: the rise of climate anxiety*, Guardian article 10.02.20 (click here to access)

Trott, C. (2020) Children's constructive climate change engagement: Empowering awareness, agency, and action, *Journal of Environmental Education Research*, 26(4), 532-554

FURTHER RESOURCES

Educating for a Future - Climate Psychology and Eco-Anxiety Course

Last term, in collaboration with the Climate Psychology Alliance, PSTT hosted some online training for primary teachers about supporting children with eco-anxiety. This two session course explored the emotional impact of facing the climate and ecological crisis, and how to identify, make sense of and support 'eco-anxiety' in children so they are able to learn effectively and with emotional resilience. We are planning to repeat this course in the near future. Further information will be available soon on our website – please **click here** or join our mailing list to ensure you receive details of the course when they become available.

The Climate Psychology Alliance - www.climatepsychologyalliance.org

Climate Psychologists - www.climatepsychologists.com

Catastrophe or Transformation - podcast series of conversations about the climate crisis www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/podcasts/370-3-talking-with-children-about-climate-change

See also the **Climate Science resource page on the PSTT website** – please visit for updates as we are in the process of adding new material www.pstt.org.uk/resources/curriculum-materials/climate-science

Caroline Hickman is a psychotherapist who teaches at the University of Bath & is a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) for whom she leads on development of therapeutic outreach services, offering workshops in schools, counselling groups and universities. With CPA she is creating 'Climate Crisis Conversations - Catastrophe or Transformation': a series of podcasts about climate psychology and eco-anxiety. Caroline works with parent groups, youth activist groups and as a psychotherapist with people dealing with eco-anxiety. She is currently researching children and young people's feelings about the climate and biodiversity crisis using a psychosocial free association methodology to uncover and explore different stories, narratives and images around our defences against the 'difficult truth' of the climate and bio-diversity crisis, and our hidden and 'less conscious' feelings about climate anxiety.