Parenting through despair with hope for our climate future

When facing climate anxiety, caregivers need to put on their own mental health oxygen mask first

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Over the summer of 2023, extreme weather, including torrential rain and subsequent flooding events, record heat waves, smoke and wildfires, pummelled communities around the world. Commenting on the fact that July 2023 was the hottest month ever recorded globally, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared: "The era of global warming has ended" and "the era of global boiling has arrived".

In response to New York City's June 2023 unprecedented clean air emergency – brought on by record wildfires in Canada – comedy writer Bess Kalb posted a message that went viral:

> *"My eldest boy (3) won't wear a mask to protect himself against smoke inhalation because it makes him scared that 'the virus' is back and I want to be like 'Well, son, we live in hell,' but instead I said 'We are so lucky to have ways to protect our bodies from unhealthy air!'"*

All around the world, parents of young children frequently face the dilemma that Kalb describes – balancing their own distress at climate-related crises, from wildfires to floods to heat waves, with the need to manage their children's feelings.

> *"This summer was downright frightening … We are used to the heat but over two weeks of temperatures at 40 °C and a couple of days at 41 and 42 was not normal. The heat index or 'feeling temperature' was above 50 most days and the wet bulb temperature crossed safe levels once. My anxiety about my child's future has nothing to do with school scores, college admissions etc. … I only worry about climate change. The anxiety is like a dull headache that never goes away."*
> Nina Subramani, Chennai, India

There is increasing conversation about and research on the mental health implications of climate change for youth and young children. But its very real and widespread impact on parents is often overlooked. In 2022, for example, one US survey of parents found that over 70% are concerned about climate change's impact on their children (Jackson et al., 2022).

Facing up to the reality of climate change as a parent can ignite a range of complex feelings. Realising that

the responsibility to create a safe and sustainable home for your child sits on you can be daunting at the best of times. And when that "home" also means the planet we live on, it can be overwhelming. The anxiety of climate change impacts greatly affects parents today, and already far too many families around the world have lost their homes, livelihoods, and security to the growing number of climate catastrophes.

Climate anxiety is growing among parents and prospective parents

The concept of climate anxiety began to be addressed in peer-reviewed literature around the mid-2010s. It is seen as closely connected with more general, threat-related emotions such as fear and worry (Pikhala, 2022a). Some use the term to refer narrowly to anxiety. Others speak of a range of emotions such as outrage, grief, dread, guilt, shock, trauma, and a feeling referred to as solastalgia – a loss of the sense of security provided by the place you call home (Pikhala, 2022b).

At first, studies looked at how climate scientists were dealing with their emotions. This led to the creation of organisations such as the Climate Psychology Alliance and support networks for people to wrestle with climate emotions, called "climate circles". Climate scientists began to speak out in their identity as parents, and parents formed climate-focused advocacy groups such as ClimateMama, Moms Clean Air Force (MCAF), and Mothers Out Front in the USA – all between 2009 and 2013; Parents for Future (Global) and Mothers Rise Up (UK) founded in 2019; and Warrior Moms (India) founded in 2020.

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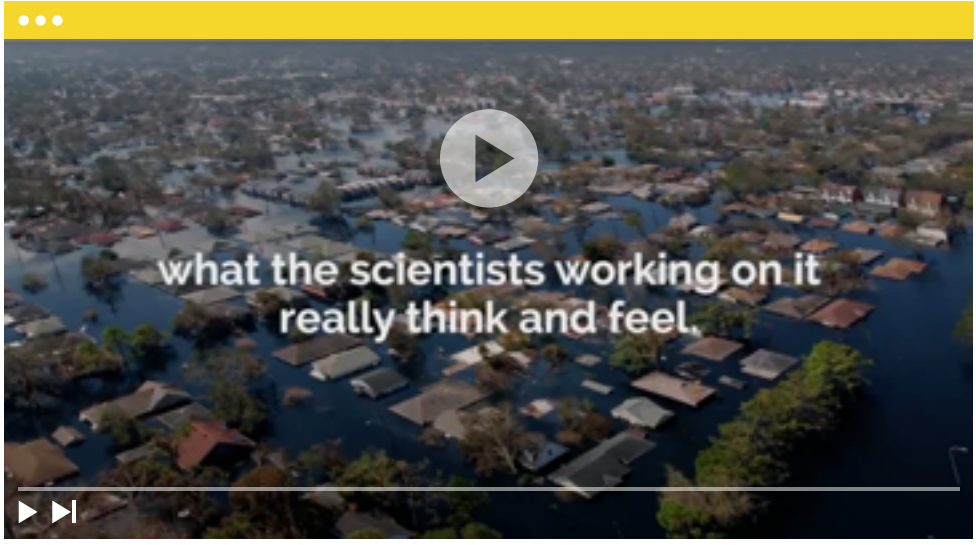
The foregrounding of mothers in this movement is characteristic of most parent affinity groups, like parent–teacher associations. It's also the case that women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and to climate anxiety, in part because of their economic position and in part because of the social pressure to be the primary caregiver (Clayton et al., 2023).

In the early days of climate feelings-related research and organising, there was little direct focus on the psychological impacts of the climate



Video: More Than Scientists

↑ Scan the QR code to watch a video from More than Scientists, which shares their personal views and feelings about climate change.

crisis on parents. This began to change in 2020 with the publication of co-author Harriet Shugarman's book, *How to Talk to Your Kids about Climate Change: Turning Angst into Action*. In the same year, a paper in *The Lancet* linked eco-grief to parenting (Cunsola et al., 2020). MCAF's website now includes a fact sheet for parents on climate change and mental health (Moms Clean Air Force, 2022).

Despite this recent progress, however, parental eco-grief remains significantly under-addressed.

> *"It seems like there is so much to be done, with limited time and resources, which often leads me to feel burnt out, exhausted, and overwhelmed. I know I can't stop, and I won't stop. So, I continue to strive to take care of my own physical and mental health, as well as my family and team members, so that we can keep moving forward, even running faster, to ensure the impact we make is more significant."*
> Yasmina Hasni, Indonesia

Five ways to process climate feelings as a parent

The cliché of "put on your own oxygen mask first" applies to this situation. Without self-work to address our own climate-related feelings, we are unlikely to effectively respond to our children's emotional needs. Indeed, ignoring the subject seems to be a common response. US-based research found that while 82% of respondents believe we must give children the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world, only 49% of parents said they had talked to their children about it (Kamenetz, 2022).

How can parents go about dealing with their own climate-related feelings? We suggest five approaches:

1 Break the silence
Engage your existing networks and other parents in conversations about climate change. Chances are that someone you already know and care about is grappling with climate feelings too and is willing to talk about them with you. Finding out you're not alone will likely make you feel better. Alternatively, use existing spaces such as Climate Cafés and The Good Grief Network, which has a 10-step peer-to-peer programme.

2 Start with gratitude
Research has shown that practising gratitude for the gifts of the natural world we enjoy every day can be a powerful driver of sustainable actions (Serazin and Emmons, 2021). As parents, we could also practise gratitude for the love we hold for our children and our desire to protect them, which in turn connects us to our wellspring of compassion for all life and concern for the future. The Work That Reconnects offers free online courses, webinars, and in-person workshops in a four-step programme that starts with gratitude as a basis for expressing pain for the world and cultivating active hope.

Photo: Our Kids' Climate

"As parents, we have engaged in the ultimate act of radical hope by bringing new life into the world, which we expect to continue on after us."

3 Connect with a community

Growing global networks of climate-concerned parents, such as Our Kids' Climate and Parents For Future, help parents unite and cross-pollinate. Parents draw on their moral authority and their grounding in a community to be effective activists. They also hold important stakeholder roles as members of school communities. Parents are visible as activists on the frontlines, working in schools and on curricula, and on issues such as infrastructure adaptation and food security. They can help find ways to build and foster communities to withstand – and also to find ways to let go – as the evolving climate crisis dictates.

4 Explore "radical hope"

A concept often credited to philosopher Jonathan Lear, radical hope involves anticipating a future good in the face of turmoil and collapse, even though we might be unable to picture what this "good" might look like right now (Van Broekhoven, n.d.). This philosophy can help us reflect deeply about how we can and will continue as a species, even when we must say goodbye to familiar places and cultures as they are irreversibly altered or even disappeared by climate change. As parents, we have engaged in the ultimate act of radical hope by bringing new life into the world, which we expect to continue on after us. How do we do our best to make good on that commitment?

"Acknowledging and moving through our own climate grief is step zero in helping children."

Photo: Our Kids' Climate

5 Practise "radical joy"
Parenting requires a level of comfort with big emotions, from tears, to tantrums, to laughter. We teach our children to regulate, not to hide from or be overwhelmed by emotions. This includes joy and, in our world, joy needs a place more than ever. Radical joy, as coined by Trebbe Johnson, is a practice of sanctifying "wounded" spaces with collective ceremony, vigil, and apology. For example, rather than avoid talking about someone who has died, you go to the funeral and sing. We do these things to "expose our hearts to difficult feelings of loss and guilt", and to find a new sense of love and acceptance.

Parenting in the climate crisis means talking about the crisis with children, managing emotions, and taking action as a family. Bringing feelings out in the open is essential in order to create family plans to address the crisis. Acknowledging and moving through our own climate grief is step zero in helping children build their own resilience and tools to contribute to change.

↗ **Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-6**

Parents from Our Kids' Climate network share what gives them hope right now

Sally Giblin, Australia

"It's so important that we retain hope. And rather than tell ourselves a story of despair and hopelessness and doom – we tell ourselves a story of optimism and solutions and people rising up for change. Problems can grow exponentially. But so can solutions. The three biggest things that give me hope?

1 Surrounding myself with positive climate content – stories of solutions and change
2 Recognising the strength of human spirit to overcome adversity – which humans have done time and time again through history
3 Finding my climate agency – my own unique way to take positive, meaningful climate action."

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Dora Napolitano, Mexico

"Since Zurciendo el planeta [which started as a virtual embroidery workshop with an ecological focus during the pandemic] became a collective I have felt so much more hope, so much more involvement, not because I was necessarily doing more myself, but because it was directly reaching more people. Before the collective, I still felt like we (my family) were a drop in the ocean. Having a strong group of like-minded women, even spread so far around the world, is really amazing. We always have someone to consult when we hear bad news, we help each other see the good news, we give each other strength to create good news stories in each of our distant communities."

Rayana Burgos, Brazil

"It gives me hope to know that I can be a game changer in the world, even if it's on a micro level. On a personal level, seeing that my family has started to understand the climate impact of their actions is important. Furthermore, what gives me hope is knowing that I managed to combine profession, lifestyle and religion in the same line of environmental defence. I've been learning to listen to stories about resilience and each person in their own way teaches me not to give up. What gives me hope is knowing that there are so many other people who, despite being afraid, still haven't given up. And because of them I won't give up either."