



Child Health and
Wellbeing Network
North East and North Cumbria



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Section 1 – Why? Part 2

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Health Impacts



[Heat can be deadly](#) and children (particularly those under 1 year of age) have more difficulty regulating their body temperature. However, the greatest risk is to those still in the womb. Exposure during pregnancy has been associated with a range of [negative impacts on pregnancy outcomes](#) - pre and [early term](#) birth, stillbirth, low birth weight and congenital heart defects. Babies born early or with low birth weight are more likely to have difficulty breathing, feeding, gaining weight and fighting infection. Impacts are exacerbated by combined heat and [air pollution](#). Preterm birth complications are the [leading cause of death](#) among children under 5, responsible for approximately 1 million deaths in 2015. Higher temperatures also lead to increased rates of [foodborne illness](#).



Extreme Weather Events



Children are at increased risk of death or injury from extreme weather. Infectious disease outbreaks and/or malnutrition are particularly common after extreme weather events (EWEs) in low-income countries. Fresh water supplies, sanitation and sewage treatment, cooking and food storage facilities can be overwhelmed or damaged. Standing water increases breeding opportunities for mosquitoes. Time spent in water or living in damp conditions can cause or exacerbate lung and skin conditions. Disruption of health services (including pharmacies), transport, power, and communication networks can interrupt the provision of medical care.



Water Borne Disease



Diarrhoeal diseases are one of the leading causes of death in children under 5 years old. Droughts and floods increase the risk of water contamination. Heat increases the geographical range of pathogens such as cholera. Warmer waters also encourage blooms of toxic algae.

Vector Borne Disease



Heat expands the geographical and seasonal habitats for vectors (e.g. mosquitoes and ticks) which spread diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, Zika virus and Lyme's disease (present in the UK). Children are more likely than adults to die from malaria or suffer complications such as anaemia, cerebral malaria, and long-term nerve problems

Pandemics



Climate change is identified as one of [7 factors](#) increasing the risk of future pandemics. Others include deforestation, industrial agriculture and exploitation of wildlife. Whilst less susceptible to the virus itself, children have suffered significant impacts on their social development, education and mental health during the COVID pandemic



Climate change is already affecting [food production](#) in many areas. There is an increasing risk of simultaneous crop failure in major food producing regions due to interacting impacts (heat, drought, storms, wildfires, soil degradation, loss of pollinators etc). In 2020 heat waves increased the number of people suffering from annual food insecurity by [98 million](#) compared to 1981-2010. This [1-minute video](#) outlines the impacts of acute malnutrition.



Sea level rise and its impact on food and water supplies is already driving local conflict and migration. Over [20 million people](#) have fled their homes due to extreme weather events every year since 2008. Some agencies are predicting up to 1 billion climate refugees by 2050. People are more likely to be displaced when extreme weather becomes combined with local conflict as social systems break down. Half of the world's refugees are children. They lack reliable access to food and clean water, shelter, healthcare and education and can become separated from caregivers.

[1-minute video](#)

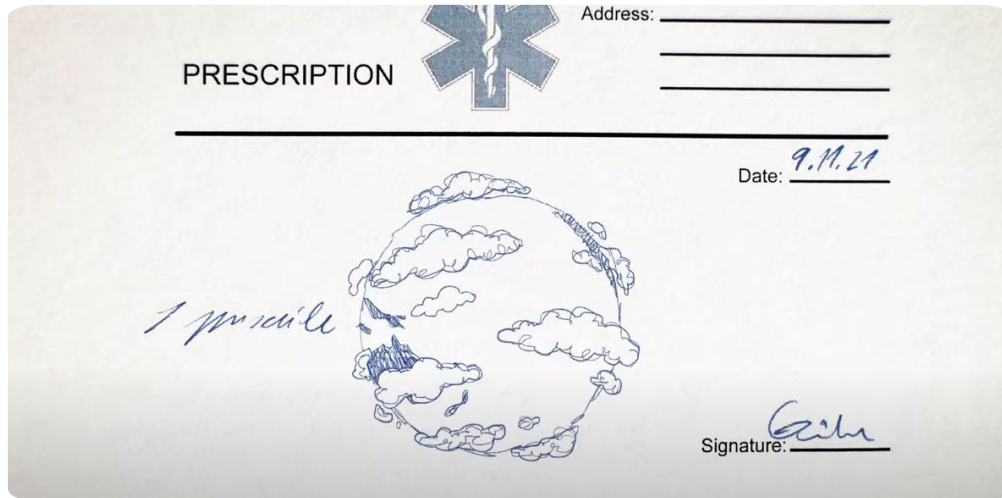


Mental health impacts on Children and Young People

Children exposed to extreme weather events may lose relatives, friends, beloved pets, experience damage to their home, school and local area and witness distress in the adults around them. If separated from care givers they are highly vulnerable to malnutrition, abuse and trafficking. They are more likely than adults to develop PTSD and other anxiety disorders, depression, and sleep disorders lasting for months or years after the event.

On the next page we will explore the psychological impacts of adverse events in childhood.

In this [2-minute](#) video doctors around the world describe the impacts they are seeing.





Further reading

- [The impact of climate change on global child health - position statement | RCPCH](#)
- [The psychological effects of climate change on children \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)
- [RCPsych declares a climate and ecological emergency and The College's position on Sustainability | Royal College of Psychiatrists \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)
- [International Review of Psychiatry: climate change special issue](#)
- [BJPsych Bulletin Climate and Mental Health Special Issue \(cambridge.org\)](#)
- [The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health: A Systematic Descriptive Review \(frontiersin.org\)](#)



Adverse Childhood Events (ACES)

It is well known that ACEs can have lifelong impacts on a child's physical and mental health and social functioning. These impacts are dose dependent – the more they experience, the worse the outcomes. The risk of ACEs increases in families under economic stress, who have more challenges to face in providing a safe environment and supportive parenting. Climate change puts more people at risk of poverty and exposes increasing numbers of children to other types of ACE -

- Extreme weather events (such as the black summer bushfires in Australia, the impact of extreme storms and household flooding, the pandemic lockdown)
- Forced migration - often entailing significant risk such as unsafe sea crossings and violence alongside loss of home, culture community and possibly family members.
- Conflict – in 2018 1 in 5 children were born into a conflict zone.

This [6 minute](#) video focuses on ACE's such as abuse or neglect within the home, but is also relevant to ACEs experienced as a result of climate change.





Attachment Theory

Attachment theory focuses on the quality of the child's relationship with caregivers, particularly in the early years of life. The attachment style forms a template for future relationships with others and with ourselves. Extreme weather events (particularly when children are separated from caregivers) and the stress families experience in response to these can impact attachment.

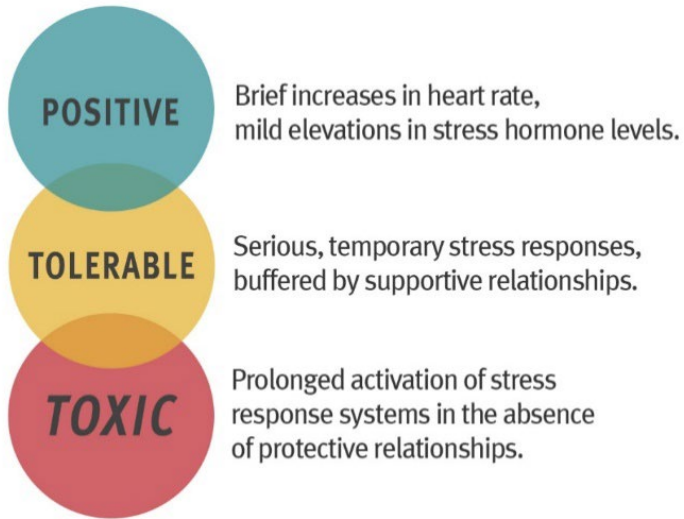
This [7-minute](#) video explains attachment theory and the consequences of disrupted attachment.





Throughout the lifespan, insecure attachment and ACEs are associated with:

- Physical health – poor functioning of the immune system (leading to more infections), long term risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer and earlier death
- Mental health – increased risk of depression, anxiety disorders including PTSD. 1 in 3 diagnosed mental health conditions in adulthood directly relate to ACEs. [96.4%](#) of psychiatrically hospitalized adolescents have a history of lifetime physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse.
- Psychological impacts – reduced ability to learn, control impulses and emotional responses, make stable relationships, expectation and aspirations.
- Health choices – increased risk of smoking, alcohol and substance misuse, poor dietary choices.
- Toxic Stress is one of the mechanisms by which these negative experiences cause physical and mental health problems. Toxic stress results from repeated or prolonged exposure to stressful events such as abuse, violence, neglect or economic hardship. This can cause prolonged release of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, hormones which can alter brain development and even gene expression.
- Increasing the number of children exposed to ACE's will increase the number of physical and mental health conditions in the population and hence demand for healthcare services, which increases the negative environmental impacts of the health care system.



Signs of Toxic Stress



Symptoms of distress may be different in children than in adults. signs of toxic stress children and teens include:

- Impaired language development
- Difficulty concentrating and learning
- Poor coping skills
- Challenging, or unusual behaviour
- Repetitive play
- Panic attacks
- Mood swings
- Sleep and continence problems
- Overeating and other compulsive behaviours
- Fear and anxiety triggered by places or people that remind them of past trauma



What can be done about it?

Education for young families, schools and communities to understand these processes, provide support to avoid ACEs or to recognise the signs and intervene early can avoid decades of problems. Working with children and young people already affected can reduce long term impacts by building resilience, adaptive coping strategies and self-esteem.



Air pollution

- 99% of the world's population breathe air which exceeds the World Health Organization (WHO) [safe limits](#).
- They estimate that [7 million people](#), many of them children, die early every year due to outdoor and indoor air pollution. This number is just the tip of the iceberg of the years lived with chronic diseases like asthma.
- This [3-minute](#) video from the WHO explores the impact of air pollution on children around the world
- The gases and particles in air pollution (e.g. PM 2.5 and Nitrous oxides) are so small they can travel through the lungs into the blood stream and cross into the brain and the womb, affecting children at every stage of development.

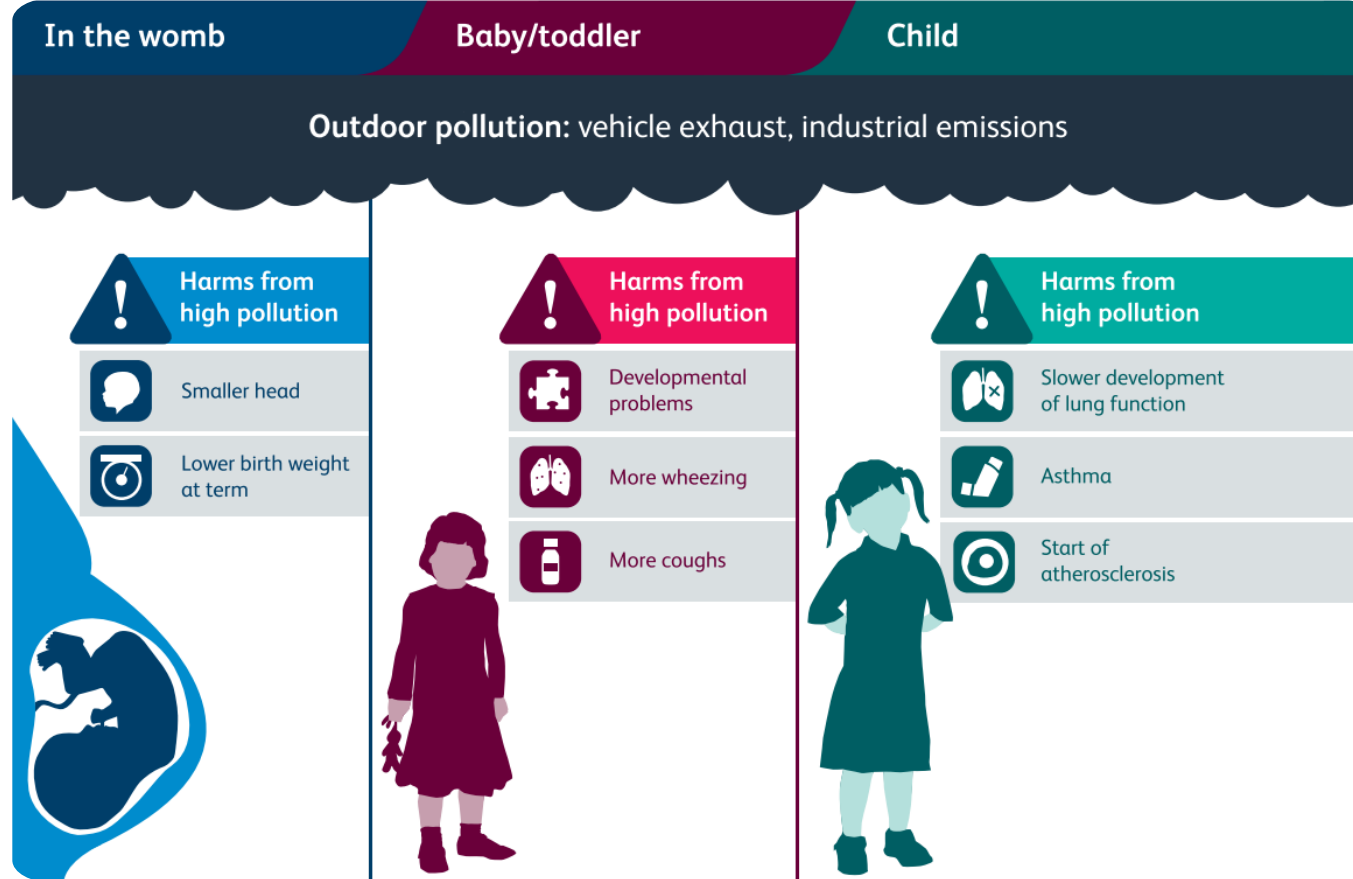
 Public Health England

Scale of the problem

It is estimated that **long-term exposure to man-made air pollution in the UK** has an annual effect equivalent to:



**28,000 to
36,000
deaths**



• *Graphic from [Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution](#) | RCP London*



Air pollution a cause in girl's death, coroner rules in landmark case

Ella Kissi Debra photo from BBC news

Asthma

Air pollution can stunt lung development in children, cause asthma (and make it worse) and increase the risk of chest infections.

Ella Kissi-Debra lived in south London and died age 9 after a series of admissions for acute asthma on days when air pollution peaked. She is the first person in the UK to have air pollution specifically mentioned as a contributor to her death by the coroner. Her mother has set up [The Ella Roberta Foundation](#) to campaign for better air quality for all.

In this [3-minute](#) video Joe from Manchester talks about his experience of air pollution and asthma



Other health impacts

Research has shown that air pollution can increase rates of miscarriage, pre-term delivery, low birth weight and still birth. It has been linked to higher blood pressure in children and the start of heart disease. In the brain, air pollution can impact children's ability to learn and has been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicide risk and neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism. Childhood exposure has even been associated with increased risk of schizophrenia. Further information available via the links below.

- [Effects of air pollution on the nervous system and its possible role in neurodevelopmental and neurodegenerative disorders - ScienceDirect](#)
- [Association of Childhood Exposure to Nitrogen Dioxide and Polygenic Risk Score for Schizophrenia With the Risk of Developing Schizophrenia | Genetics and Genomics | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#)
- [Effect of long-term exposure to air pollution on anxiety and depression in adults: A cross-sectional study - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [The relation between past exposure to fine particulate air pollution and prevalent anxiety: observational cohort study \(bmj.com\)](#)
- [Air Pollution \(Particulate Matter\) Exposure and Associations with Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar, Psychosis and Suicide Risk: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)



Air pollution in the UK

A recent report from the [Global action plan](#) showed that more than a quarter of schools in the UK were in areas with high levels of air pollution.

In this [5-minute video](#) a Manchester GP discusses the impacts and measures local air pollution in her practice area, including around local schools.



Climate Change and Air pollution -

Heatwaves and wildfires raise air pollution levels. The smoke from wildfires can affect the air thousands of miles away. Flooding leads to damp living conditions with moulds and fungal spores.

Social Justice - In both richer and poorer nations, communities living in areas with the highest levels of air pollution are disproportionately poor and/or BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour). In industrialised nations, air pollution is largely due to road traffic but in the developing world much is caused by the use of solid fuel and kerosene cook stoves and lanterns by those living without access to electricity. Women and children are most at risk.





What can you do to reduce air pollution, and protect yourself and your children?

Walk, cycle or use public transport where possible. Not only does this mean you are not contributing to the problem, surprisingly even on busy roads, [people on cycles take in the least air pollution](#).

Avoid walking or cycling on routes with high pollution levels (e.g. main roads).

If you are driving – don't idle your car in traffic. Switch the engine off. This will save fuel as well.

Check DEFRA's [Daily Air Quality Index](#) for pollution levels near you. On days when pollution levels are high, stay indoors and close windows





Educate others – patients, families, students – about air pollution and the health benefits of walking and cycling.

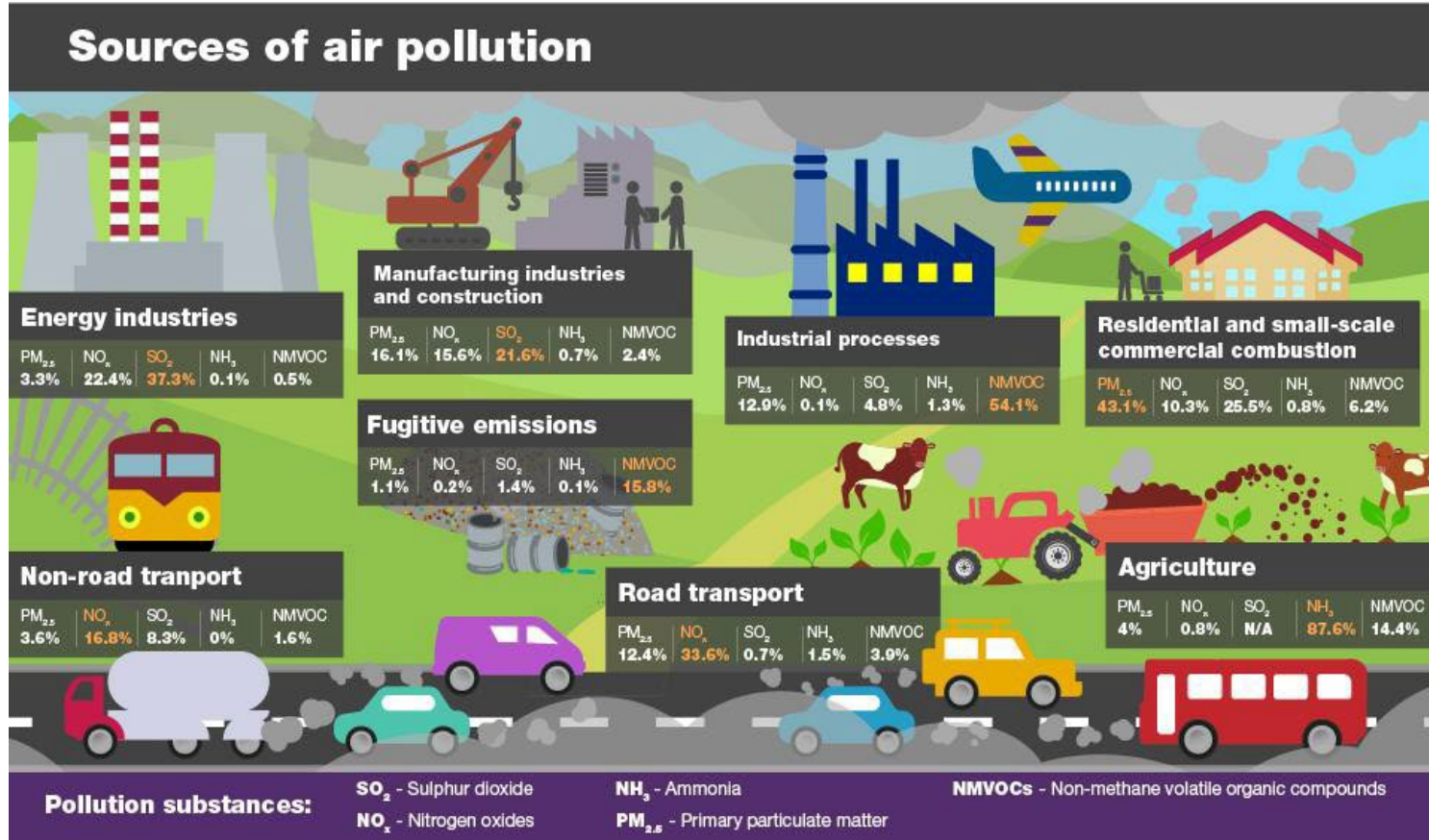
Support organisations (local and national) campaigning for better air quality e.g.

- [Clean Air Hub | Global Action Plan](#)
- [Mums for Lungs](#)
- [Air quality | Campaign For Better Transport](#)
- [Clean air campaigns hub | Asthma + Lung UK \(blf.org.uk\)](#)

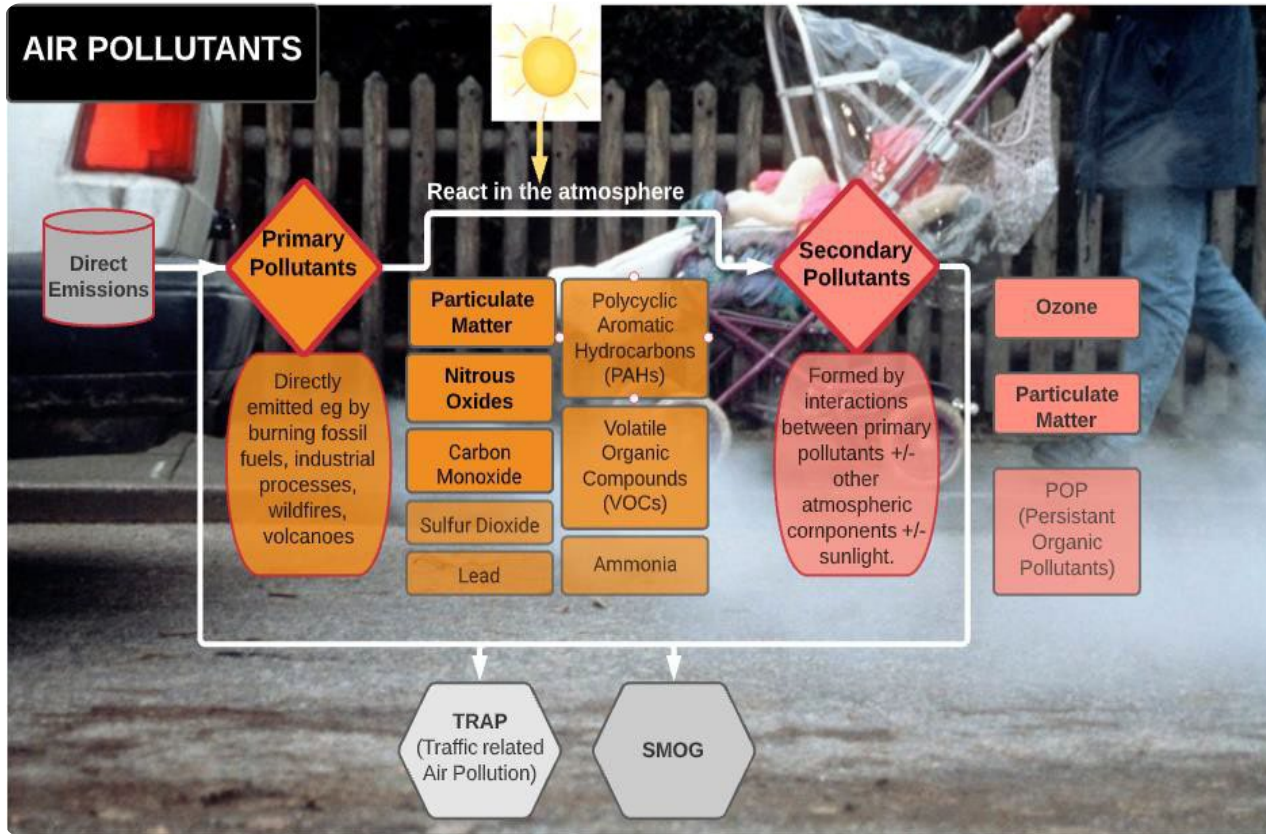


[Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution | RCP London](#)

Constituents of Air Pollution and Measuring Air Quality



What's in Outdoor (Ambient) Air Pollution?



Air pollution has both human (e.g. fossil fuel burning, industrial processes etc.) and natural sources (volcanoes, wildfires etc). Constituents of air pollution can be solids, liquids or gases. Some of those causing the most health impacts are listed in the diagram below. They can be divided in to **primary** (directly emitted) and **secondary** (formed by chemical interactions in the air).



Summary of recommended AQG levels and interim targets

Pollutant	Averaging time	IT1	IT2	IT3	IT4	AQG level
PM _{2.5} , µg/m ³	Annual	35	25	15	10	5
PM _{2.5} , µg/m ³	24-hour ^a	75	50	37.5	25	15
PM ₁₀ , µg/m ³	Annual	70	50	30	20	15
PM ₁₀ , µg/m ³	24-hour ^a	150	100	75	50	45
O ₃ , µg/m ³	Peak season ^b	100	70	–	–	60
O ₃ , µg/m ³	8-hour ^a	160	120	–	–	100
NO ₂ , µg/m ³	Annual	40	30	20	–	10
NO ₂ , µg/m ³	24-hour ^a	120	50	–	–	25
SO ₂ , µg/m ³	24-hour ^a	125	50	–	–	40
CO, mg/m ³	24-hour ^a	7	–	–	–	4

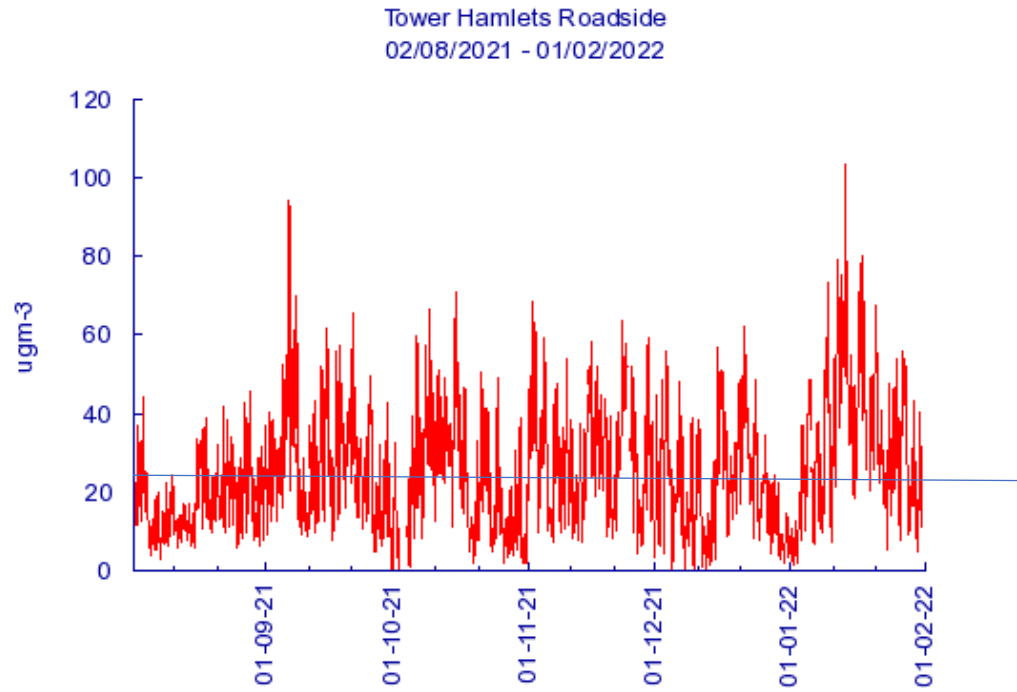
Air quality guideline levels for both long- and short-term exposure in relation to critical health outcomes.

Interim targets to guide reduction efforts for the achievement of the air quality guideline levels.

Good practice statements in the management of certain types of particulate matter for which evidence is insufficient to derive quantitative air quality guideline levels, but points to their health relevance.

Measuring Air Quality – Most measurements focus on one or more of the main culprits in terms of health impacts – Particulate matter, Ozone and Nitrous Oxides.

WHO Air Quality Guidelines and Interim Targets - Recently updated (2021), this chart shows WHO safe limits for air pollution.



Current WHO NO₂ 24 hr limit 25 micrograms/M³

Finding Local Data - This website ([Air quality in England \(airqualityengland.co.uk\)](https://airqualityengland.co.uk)) allows you to see real time air quality measurements for sites in the UK and creates graphs for bespoke time periods showing when spikes occur. For example - this graph shows how often nitrogen dioxide levels exceeded WHO recommendations (25µg/m³) in the last 6 months in Tower Hamlets. NB levels listed as 'low' on the site have not been updated with current WHO guidance.

Alternatively you can purchase a monitor to use to investigate levels yourself.

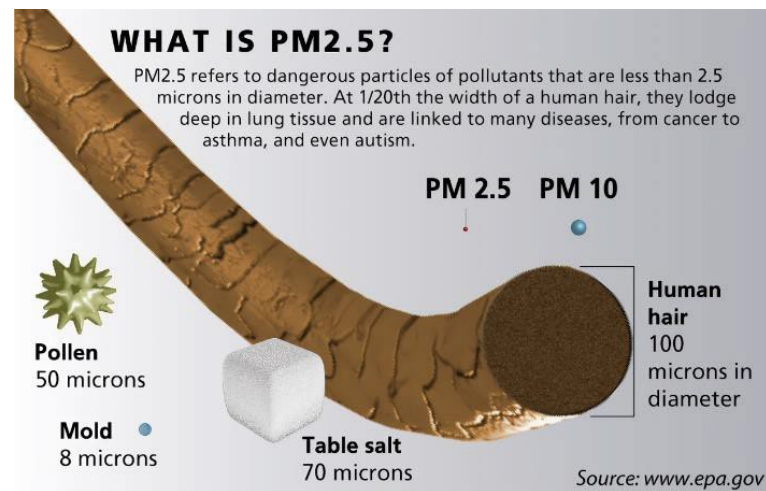
In February 2022 [research by City Hall](#) in London showed that all London hospitals, medical centers and care homes are located in areas which breach the new WHO guidance.

Specific Components



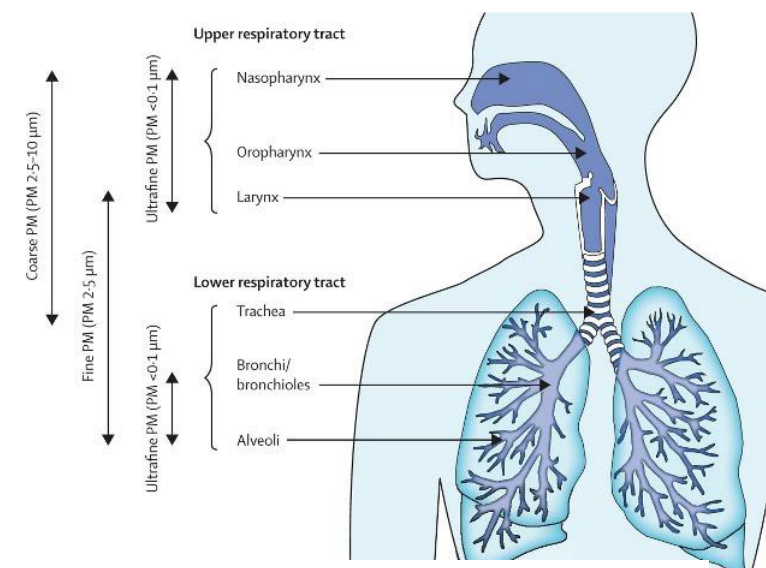
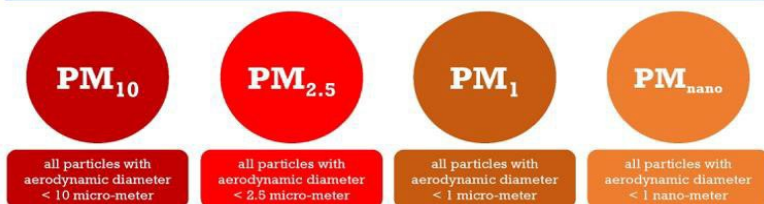
Particulate Matter (PM) –

Is usually grouped by size (size matters!) as this determines how far it can penetrate the body. The smallest particles pass through the lungs into the blood stream and cross both the placenta and the blood brain barrier.



PM consists of many chemical components, and both primary and secondary processes (i.e. chemical conversion of gases) can contribute to it. Chemical composition varies significantly with size due to differences in formation mechanisms.

COMMON PARTICULATE MATTER (PM) SIZES



air pollution and asthma - The Lancet



Nitrous Oxides (NO_x)

About 80% of NO_x emissions are due to transport, mostly diesel vehicles. At high concentrations it is an irritant causing cough, inflammation and shortness of breath. Evidence shows strong associations between high NO_x and impacts on lung development and respiratory infections in childhood. This partly explains the concern about diesel cars.

Ozone In the stratosphere ozone is protective because it reduces the amount of harmful UV radiation that gets through. However, at ground level it is a powerful oxidant that irritates airways causing coughing and exacerbating respiratory conditions such as asthma and COPD.

Air Pollution – Common Combinations

TRAP - Traffic-Related Air Pollution

A mixture of air pollutants from combustion of fossil fuels and non-combustion sources e.g. road dust, tyre and brake wear. The non-combustion ingredients remain a problem even with electric vehicles.

Smog - derived from the merging of two words (smoke and fog) Smog is a yellowish or blackish fog formed mainly of ground level- ozone and other air pollutants. [The Great Smog of London, 1952 - BBC Archive](#)

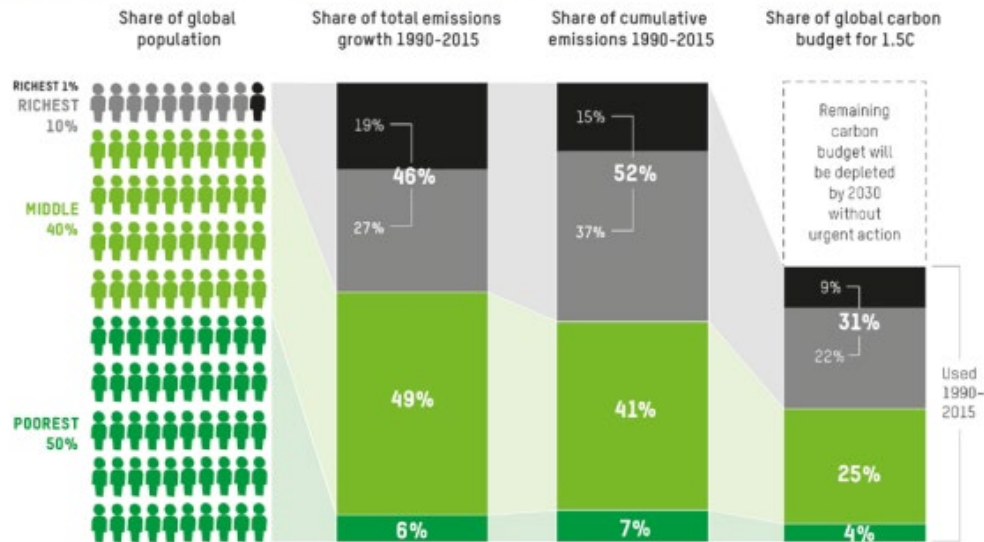
This 2-minute video explains the concern about diesel.
[What's the deal with diesel? -](#)





Climate Injustice and Inequality

Figure 6: Summary of headline findings from Oxfam and SEI's new research



Per capita income threshold (SPPP2011) of richest 1%: \$109k; richest 10%: \$38k; middle 40%: \$6k; and bottom 50%: less than \$6k.
Global carbon budget from 1990 for 33% risk of exceeding 1.5C: 1,205Gt.

The climate crisis is also a crisis of intergenerational, racial, gender and social injustice.

Whilst the richest 1%, (whose lives are, so far, barely affected) are responsible for twice the emissions of the poorest 50%, it is marginalised communities: the poor, children, elderly people, BIPOC (*Black, Indigenous People of Colour*) communities and those with chronic disease who are bearing the brunt of the health and social impacts of the Climate and Ecological emergencies.

These groups are largely excluded from negotiations about action to address these crises.



Extreme weather events

Poorer communities are more likely to live the areas worst affected and have least resources to survive the event or rebuild afterwards.

UNDP

Sacrifice Zones

The industrial processes which support the lifestyles of the affluent often pollute local air, water, land and food sources leading to higher rates of illness in local populations who are disproportionately poorer and/or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and other people of Colour) communities. pollution, affecting the air, water and land. A few examples of this are given below:

- [BAME and poorer Londoners more likely to live in areas with toxic air | LGOV](#)
- [How Shell is devastating the Niger Delta | ActionAid International](#)
- [Canada's oil sands residents complain of health effects - The Lancet](#)

This [6-minute](#) video exposes the child labour involved in mining for cobalt used in batteries.

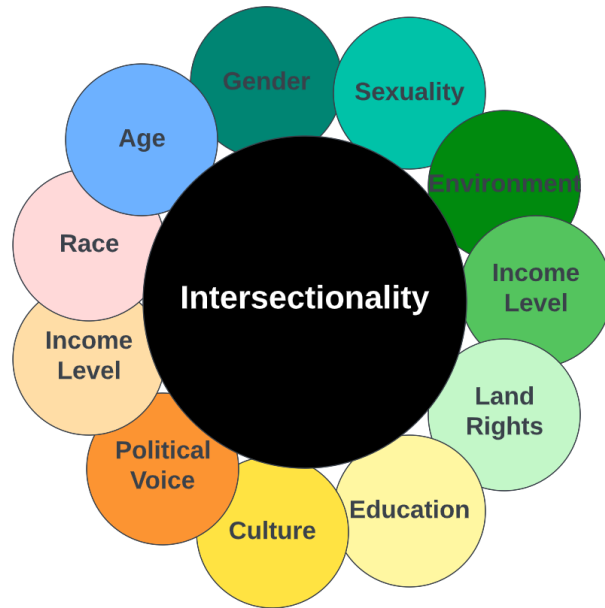




Intersectionality

This perspective highlights the way that all aspects of an individual or community can overlap to multiply vulnerabilities and experience of oppression.

Image from [5 ways climate change is disrupting girls' lives | Plan International](#)



Take the example of a young girl living in a low -income family in the global south during a prolonged climate induced drought. As food becomes scarce, as a girl, she may be the last in the family to be fed so she is at higher risk of malnutrition. As the situation deteriorates, she is more likely to be taken out of school than her brothers, to have to walk further to collect water and firewood. During these daily journeys she is more exposed to gender-based violence which increases as temperatures rise and communities break down. As the family's financial situation deteriorates further, she may be sold into marriage at a young age. As a teenage wife without education or access to contraception she is likely to have multiple pregnancies, lose many of her children at a young age and is also at higher risk of dying in pregnancy.

The closer relationship of indigenous peoples and farmers to their local ecosystems increases their vulnerability to psychological impacts of ecological degradation which, in many areas of the world, is disrupting ancestral ways of living.

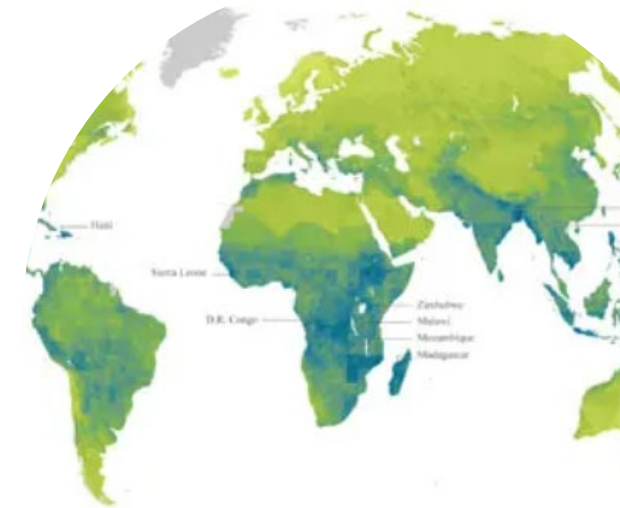


The young girl is at higher risk of malnutrition. As the situation deteriorates, she is more likely to be taken out of school than her brothers, to have to walk further to collect water and firewood. During these daily journeys she is more exposed to gender-based violence which increases as temperatures rise and communities break down. As the family's financial situation deteriorates further, she may be sold into marriage at a young age. As a teenage wife without education or access to contraception she is likely to have multiple pregnancies, lose many of her children at a young age and is also at higher risk of dying in pregnancy.



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It is equally important to recognise that diversity brings new voices, wisdom and experience to our endeavour to create a sustainable world in which all can thrive. 80% of remaining global biodiversity is within the lands of global indigenous peoples. We have much to learn from cultures which demand that in every decision, be it personal, governmental or corporate, we must consider how it will affect our descendants seven generations into the future.



In this optional [15 -minute](#) Ted talk a university student Adriana Laurent tells her own story of her childhood experience of an extreme weather event in Honduras and explains how climate change exacerbates existing inequalities.



The Anthropocene

Some have objected to the term 'Anthropocene', arguing that it mistakenly attributes planetary damage to all people, when in fact only a small percentage of the human race have driven the changes. Some also argue that the problems began before the industrial revolution, with European colonization which started the attack on the natural world with mono-culture plantations, alongside the genocide and enslavement of indigenous peoples.

[What is the Anthropocene and why does it matter? | Natural History Museum \(nhm.ac.uk\)](https://www.nhm.ac.uk/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-why-does-it-matter/)





Eco-Distress

Increasing numbers of children and young people are experiencing negative feelings relating to climate change and the wider environmental crisis. In this course we will use the umbrella term Eco-distress for all these feelings, which can include:

- Sadness
- Grief
- Anxiety and panic
- Guilt
- Powerlessness
- Anger



*I don't think many people in my generation will be alive in 20-30 years –
Jon age 17*



Some young people find these feelings impact on their ability to function, concentrate, their appetite, sleep and may experience nightmares. Some question whether it is safe for them to consider having their own families when they are older, or whether they can justify this given the environmental impact people have on the planet (see [The Birthstrike Movement](#)).

Eco-distress is common, across countries and cultures. Children and young people are particularly affected as they will live longer to see these crises unfold and fear the impact on their dreams for their futures. They lack the power to implement the solutions they wish to see enacted and feel their voices are not heard.

Some also make the connection between our lifestyles in industrialised nations and the price paid for this by low-income nations, including as a result of colonialism. This can leave them with paralysing feelings of guilt. These feelings are not confined to children though.

Adults, particularly parents and those involved with caring for children may also be deeply affected. People of any age living in areas already experiencing significant impacts and those most closely connected to the natural world (e.g. indigenous peoples, farmers and environmental scientists) are also more vulnerable to these emotions.

However, it is not necessary to have directly experienced changes caused by climate change (e.g. flooding) to experience eco-distress. It can also be a response to seeing news reports or reading about it.

In this [2-minute](#) video a group of young people talk about their feelings.





A recent [study](#) from the Lancet of ten thousand young people aged 16-24 over ten countries found that:

- 75% think that the future is frightening
- Over half (55%) felt the things they most valued would be destroyed
- Over half (56%) felt that humanity is doomed
- 4 out of 10 are hesitant to have children because of climate change.
- Nearly half reported an impact on their daily functioning
- Institutional Betrayal - 60% of the young people in the survey felt their governments were failing to act and lying about the effectiveness of actions they were taking. This led to feelings of betrayal, anguish, abandonment and anger.





It is important to recognise that Eco-distress is not an illness or mental health disorder. Mental illnesses are characterised by distorted perceptions of threat. In contrast, eco-distress is a proportionate and rationale response to a very real, potentially existential threat.

Having said that, as a chronic cause of stress this can exacerbate other mental health issues and undermine mental wellbeing in the long term. A survey of child psychiatrists in the UK found that over half (57%) are seeing children and young people who are expressing eco-distress.

Some see eco-distress as a form of collective trauma which the climate movement has brought awareness to, in the same way that the #Metoo and Black Lives Matter movements have brought awareness to other forms of collective trauma.





So how can we respond to, and help young people manage, these feelings?

How adults and institutions respond to eco-distress is critical. In the study above over 80% had tried to talk to an adult about their feelings but almost half said they had been ignored or dismissed, exacerbating their feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

Many adults feel paralysed in responding to these concerns. They may feel they don't know enough about the situation to respond or offer advice and assistance and powerless to help. Also, this is not a single event that 'time will heal'. Individuals are re-traumatized by reports in the media on an almost daily basis.

So what is the best approach?

Psychologists advise the following: (this advice is equally relevant for adults struggling with eco-distress)



1. **Listen and validate**
 - a. The most important thing is to listen to their concerns and take them seriously. Don't minimise this
 - b. Allow them to express their feelings and reassure them that they are entirely natural and rational.
2. **Educate yourself on the topic so that they see you are taking it seriously**
3. **Help them take action**
 - a. Taking action is probably the best way to alleviate eco-distress. It reduces the sense of powerlessness and often puts people in contact with groups who share and understand these emotions – building a community of support around them
 - b. Showing that you are also prepared to act helps to counter feelings of betrayal and abandonment
 - c. What action is chosen should be partly guided by the child or young person and be age appropriate
4. **Addressing responsibility**
 - a. Remind them that is everyone's responsibility – not just theirs. Whilst we all can (and should) contribute the solutions there are limits what any one person can reasonably achieve. Show you mean this by talking to them about what you can do about this together
5. **Nurture hope**
 - a. Encourage them to explore with you what is being done to address the crises, locally and around the world
6. **Promote good mental wellbeing**
 - a. Make sure you are doing what you can to promote good mental wellbeing more generally. Pay attention to nutrition, sleep, routine, exercise
 - b. Find time for activities which bring them (and you) joy, allow creative outlet and time with friends and family. Model these behaviours yourself
 - c. Reconnect with nature

In this [3-minute video](#) Australian teenagers talk about how taking action helps them manage their eco-distress



Further Resources



- The Royal College of Psychiatrist has produced a [podcast](#) and fact sheets for [children and young people](#) and for [parents, carers, teachers and other adults](#) who support young people.
- [Home \(climatepsychologyalliance.org\)](https://climatepsychologyalliance.org/) – website includes resources on managing eco-distress in yourself and others and has a section for young people. There are also dates for online ‘climate cafes’
- [Home | Climate Cafés \(climatecafes.org\)](https://climatecafes.org/)
- [An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators](#)



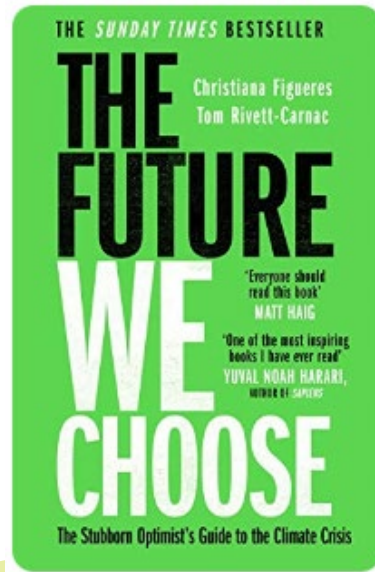
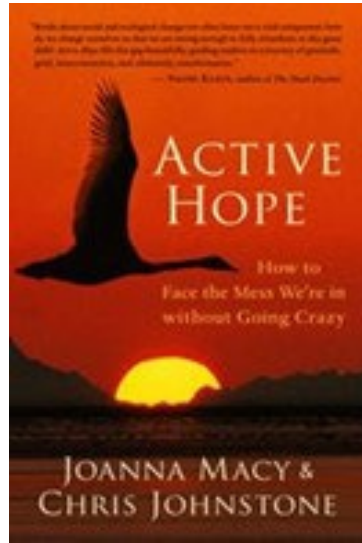
Books

Coco's Fire: Changing Climate Anxiety into Climate Action – J. Wortzel L. Champlin, The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry Climate Committee – book for younger children





For older teenagers and adults



- [Active Hope](#) – website and a book Active Hope, by eco-philosopher Joana Macy and resilience specialist Dr Chris Johnstone. If you are interested in finding out about this approach, free training is available [here](#).
- The Future We Choose – Surviving the Climate Crisis – Book by Christiana Figueres
- [Ten ways to confront the climate crisis without losing hope | Climate crisis | The Guardian](#) (excellent article by Rebecca Solnit)



Reflection:

Take a moment to reflect on your own feelings and thoughts about climate change. Complete the following sentences. Share them below if you feel comfortable.

1. When I think about the state of our world, I would say things are getting...
2. My main concerns are...
3. Some feelings that come up when I think about these are...
4. What I do with these feelings is...



Activism

Children are already bearing the brunt of climate impacts. They have a right to be heard. A [report](#) published in 2022 by Save the Children based on dialogue with 54,000 children in 41 countries demonstrated the scale of impacts children are experiencing but also their determination to fight for their future. 'They are not passive victims' - 35% are already engaged in some form of campaigning.



Young activists



The most famous story is that of Greta Thunberg who, at the age of 15, started skipping school every week to sit out side the Swedish parliament. She went on to lead a global movement of [school strikes](#) and has made a series of extraordinary, impassioned, eloquent, honest and scathing speeches to world leaders. Most recently she refused to attend the latest COP27 meeting stating that these meetings were an opportunity for *“people in power... to [use] greenwashing, lying and cheating.”* See a sample of her speeches in this [2-minute video](#) (although they are all worth watching in full)

There are lots of books about Great including: Greta and the Giants: inspired by Greta Thunberg's stand to save the world: 1





Whilst Greta has empowered youth activists and brought them to the attention of the media many other young people around the world have been taking action long before her and continue to do so. Listen to some of their stories here: www.unicef.org/stories/young-climate-activists-demand-action-inspire-hope

"What's at stake right now is the existence of my generation." Xiuhtezcatl Martinez – environmental activist since age 6, formerly youth director of Earth Guardians and part of the group of young people who filed a lawsuit against the American Government for knowingly violating their rights to life, liberty and property.



"When people say something is impossible, the sheer absoluteness of that statement should be a motivation to investigate further." Boyan Slat. – At 16 yrs old he was on holiday in Greece and saw more plastic than fish in the sea. Over the next few years he kept working on the problem, eventually dropping out of university to set up the [Ocean Clean-up](#) project which is now removing plastic from oceans and rivers around the world.



"... the best cure is action ... creates a sense of solidarity, of cooperation and productivity in the face of despair' – Alice Hardinge Youth activist



Image: Kids against plastic

Here in the UK Sisters Ella and Amy Meek, have created a movement – [Kids Against Plastic](#) which encourages young people to take positive action on a range of environmental issues. In this [2-minute](#) video they describe one of their campaign successes.

And in Tower Hamlets a group of primary school children managed to stop a play space from being dismantled - [Tower Hamlets: Children stop play space from being dismantled - BBC News](#)



Image: [Tower Hamlets: Children stop play space from being dismantled - BBC News](#)

Empowerment not exploitation



Whilst it is inspiring to see young people taking the initiative it is also heart-breaking that they need to do this. We must not talk about young people 'saving the world'. They will not be in positions of power soon enough to enact the rapid change necessary in the current decade, nor is it fair for adults to delegate responsibility for this to them.

What we must do is empower and, above all, listen and respond.

Support for young activists

[#iwill](#) provides support and guidance for young activists and educators. They outline the features of high quality social action:

WHAT IS HIGH QUALITY SOCIAL ACTION?

What does great youth social action look like? Research suggests that high quality activities will meet six principles including:

1. Be youth-led
2. Be challenging
3. Have social impact
4. Allow progression to other opportunities
5. Be embedded in a young person's life
6. Enable reflection about the value of the activity

The higher the quality of the social action, the more likely it is to benefit both the young people involved and the communities or causes they are trying to help.



Benefits of protest

Beyond any impact they may achieve for their causes, youth activist also gain many important life skills such as:

- Emotional regulation (including in response to vilification on social media)
- Teamworking
- Leading
- Confidence to talk to authority figures
- Understanding their rights
- Understanding of social justice issues
- Conflict resolution and non-violent communication

Protesting is not easy

Whilst taking action is one of the most effective ways to manage eco-distress it can also be emotionally and physically draining. In this [editorial](#) written by a developmental psychologist and a youth activist the mental health burden of the climate crisis and activism are discussed.





Non-violent Direct Action

Environmental activists of all ages have been working, around the world, for decades to demand the level of action that is required to halt or at least limit the worst impacts of climate change and other environmental impacts. It is clear by now that tactics such as marches and petitions are not effective to achieve this level of change. As a result many people, including children and young people, are making a choice to take direct action which may involve illegal and disruptive activities such as blocking roads.

Whilst the effectiveness of such actions can also be debated, sometimes these debates themselves are a mechanism for continuing to fail to listen to the message. Activists argue that illegal activity is justified by the severity of the threat we face and that the persistent and reckless failure of governments to act to protect the health and well-being of the citizens they are elected to serve has broken the social contract. The fact that the UK governments plan to achieve net zero has been judged [inadequate and illegal](#) in UK courts only underlines this argument.

Protest is a [human right](#) and has driven many positive changes in our societies (women suffrage, the civil rights movement, abolition of slavery, gay rights, health and safety legislation etc). The protestors involved in these movement were often criticised for being disruptive and counterproductive at the time and it is only with hindsight that we see them as heroes. [Non-violent civil disobedience](#) has been shown to be the most effective method of driving regime and social change.

Children and young people have limited avenues to have their voices heard. They are too young to vote and are often ignored or patronised. Many now see non-violent protest as the only way they can wield any influence.



Image: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/protest-isahumanright>



The right to protest?

In many countries environmental activists of any age are at serious risk of experiencing violence and even [murder](#). Currently in the UK the right to protest is being [squeezed](#). The Police, crime sentencing and courts act (2022), and the current Public Order bill have significantly increased the potential penalties for protest, imposed vague definitions regarding the amount of noise and disruption a peaceful protest can cause and increased the risk someone may inadvertently break the law. The passage of these bills has been accompanied by some appalling and aggressive rhetoric in parliament, [vilifying and ridiculing environmental protestors](#).

For young activists these new laws can close off their only route to manage their climate distress – they are silenced or criminalized. This places their mental health at significant risk and increases the chance of their total disengagement with civil authority. Coupled with the increasing tendency for the media not to report protests this can drive more extreme actions for which they are then attacked. Many young activists are extremely well-informed and their despair is distressing to witness. In this 2 minute video a young Just Stop Oil protestor explains why she is taking action. Whilst it is uncomfortable to watch we should not look away. Take a moment to reflect on the question this young woman poses – [why does it take young people like me up on a F**king Gantry for you to listen?](#)





There are difficult questions to consider when faced with young people desperate enough to put their lives, their futures and their liberty at risk. How, as adults, should we respond? What does this mean for our duty of care? How do we feel about police officers filming children during school strike protests? And how does that impact children's perception of the police and their government as institutions intended to protect and serve the community?





Resources

- [Home | UK Youth Climate Coalition \(ukycc.com\)](https://www.ukycc.com)
- [Fridays For Future](https://www.fridaysforfuture.org)
- UNICEF have a Toolkit for young activists that can be used in schools or youth settings. <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/toolkit-young-climate-activists>
- Surfers Against Sewage have created a number of resources around Youth Activism as part of their Ocean School <https://www.sas.org.uk/ocean-school/>
- Kids Against Plastic offer a range of resources and toolkits – tailored to the curriculum and different age groups to support schools to become a plastic Clever School <https://plasticcleverschools.co.uk/>

