Supporting mental health and wellbeing through climate change education
Evidence and Practical Tools

Many educators will be very familiar with the scale and threat posed by climate change and will want to share that knowledge with their students through the curriculum. When doing so, it's important to ensure that climate-related content is communicated in a way that considers the emotional impact it can have upon children and young people.

This guide explores how children and young people's mental health and wellbeing might be affected by experiencing and learning about the causes and impacts of climate change. It introduces a range of ways children and young people can be supported to engage with constructive narratives, learn coping strategies, and develop agency to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Why is this important?

Recent research showed that around a fifth of young people across 27 countries thought it was too late to fix the climate crisis.[1] Fear-inducing representations of climate change are common in the media, but fear is generally an ineffective tool for motivating genuine personal engagement.[2] Instead, sharing messages of hope and optimism alongside examples of positive changes already being made can facilitate action by helping children and young people to understand that rather than it being too late, they can in fact make a difference.[3]

Awareness of climate change can provoke a range of emotions such as fear, anger, hopelessness, despair, apathy and overwhelm,[4,5] which can affect wellbeing and mental health.[6,7] Strong emotions about climate change can be a healthy and natural response for young people and are an understandable response to living in the climate crisis;[8] climate change will be a backdrop to their lives, and many young people are exposed to it through different types of media. It is important that those teaching and communicating about climate change are aware of these potential emotional responses and for young people to be able to access appropriate support.[9]

Educators should not assume that these natural emotional responses are indicative of a mental health condition. For some, they can even be helpful motivators for taking climate action.[8,10,11] It is very important that adults do not diminish these experiences and validate that they can be healthy and caring responses to a real unfolding crisis.

However, for some young people these emotional responses can be challenging to cope with.[6,11] Research tells us that children and young people want support on how to cope with the potential impact of climate change on their mental health and wellbeing,[10] and for their education to support them to take positive action and take control of their futures.[12,13] They report that a source of their distress is not having the adults in their lives taking it seriously and listening to their concerns.[10]

While anyone can experience these impacts, children and young people can be particularly vulnerable and may feel overly personally responsible for fixing the climate crisis.[10,14] These experiences have been reported by educators, mental health professionals, parents and carers, and young people themselves. Over half of child and adolescent psychiatrists have seen children and young people distressed about climate change and the environment,[15] and teachers report rising rates of both climate awareness and climate anxiety among their students.[16]

During the Nature Park pilot phase, top learner responses on how they felt about climate change were: scared, angry, sad, disappointed, worried. In a follow up activity focused on learners coming up with positive solutions when the question was asked again the top responses were happy, thankful and relieved. For a solutions-focused activity that can be adapted for a wide range of learners see Nature Park activity Ideas for Improvement.

Children and young people in Nature Park pilot schools often did not yet link localised extreme weather events happening in England to climate change – seeing climate change as something happening in other countries. Awareness and experience of climate impacts are closely linked: climate-related anxiety and distress is higher among young people who have personally experienced a climate event (e.g. a flood).[4,7,17,18] Those with relatives or links in countries currently seeing high frequency climate related weather events may also have a higher awareness. Understanding which of your learners may have these personal experiences will be useful in anticipating responses.

What does this mean for teaching about climate change and engaging with nature?

Learning about constructive and hopeful narratives, engaging with positive action - especially when done together with others - and spending time in nature can all be protective for wellbeing and mental health.[19] Here we share four key areas that have a role in supporting children and young people's mental health in the context of climate education, which can be drawn on flexibly depending on your setting and learners' needs.

Connecting with nature

Spending time in and caring for nature can support mental health and wellbeing, as well as physical health.[20] More biodiverse spaces are especially beneficial for mental health and wellbeing, and have been linked to improvements in mood, happiness and cognitive function, and reductions in stress, anxiety and depression.[21,22] Connecting with the natural world can also build children and young people's skills to care for the environment and foster a love for nature, and feeling connected to nature is strongly correlated with pro-environmental behaviour.[20,23]

"Q: How did you feel in the space?
A: I felt calm, relaxed the more I was there. Intrigued."
KS3 pupil recording their feelings about an outdoor space in a Nature Park app

Practical tools

Opportunities available through Nature Park like texture mapping and Hidden nature challenge can help young people begin their journey to a greater connection with nature. Getting involved in nature projects at school can be an opportunity for children and young people to have a visible influence over their school environment and take part in decision making, building their agency and supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

Highlighting the positives

While the seriousness of climate change should not be shied away from, the positives of climate action are important to communicate too. Climate action can create 'win-wins' for wider social issues that young people may care about, such as reducing inequalities in our societies and improving health and wellbeing. These opportunities to reduce climate change and become more resilient to its impacts, while also making our societies happier and healthier are a cause for optimism - such as improving housing, increasing the use of active transport (such as cycling and walking) and improving green spaces.[4,24,25]

"If we make people fatalistic about climate change they simply will not act. The lesson is that if we want to encourage action on climate change, we need to focus on solutions more than terrifying people about an existential threat."
Ben Page, Ipsos

Educators can share examples of positive climate action already being taken and encourage hopeful narratives, such as 'there are many steps we can take towards a better future' and 'I can be a part of creating the future I want to see.' Communicating the benefits of climate action for tackling wider social and economic issues - such as social justice – can also help young people to build 'systems thinking' skills to understand how different issues are connected and why they matter. These messages of hope and optimism can help protect children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and build their trust that climate action is being taken by leaders and societal actors.

Practical tools

Co-beneficial and positive solutions that you can explore with students include nature-based solutions, which harness the power of nature to improve our ecosystems, biodiversity and people's health and wellbeing. These solutions can help us address societal challenges such as climate change. For example, restoring environments that boost people's access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food[26] and creating outdoor spaces to promote social gathering or exercise. For nature-based solutions suitable for education settings see our Grey to Green guide.

Building agency: connecting young people to opportunities to take climate action

Over-emphasising climate action as an individual responsibility can make young people feel like the climate crisis is their problem alone to solve. It can also build narratives that can exacerbate distress and undermine action, such as 'I am too small to make a difference' or 'other people don't care about climate change.' Supporting children and young people to take control of climate stories and narratives is not only an important part of helping them cope with their climate-related emotions, but also to take action.[3] Taking action together (collective climate action) can benefit young people's mental health and wellbeing and build agency, hope and community connection.[4,19]

There are many different ways people can contribute to climate action. Exploring what children and young people enjoy doing, what they are good at and ways this can align with what the world needs can help identify the right climate actions for them. Sharing a wide range of different stories and examples of climate action can help inspire students about what is possible. Developing a stronger sense of agency in young people includes the desire, motivation, knowledge and capacity to act, and the sense that their actions can make a difference. Everyone will have their own unique capabilities and ways to contribute to change.

Practical tools

The Nature Park process has been designed to include opportunities for young people with a broad range of skills or interests to be involved and to be able to recognise their role in making change. Find out what opportunities to get involved in positive action exist in your school and local community and help students to get involved if they want to. Use activities to explore questions such as: what interests and skills do the students have? What actions do they take already?

Exploring climate-related emotions

Bringing mental health into conversations about climate change can help build wider skills for good mental health and wellbeing.[9] For example, in the context of exploring climate-related emotions, students can learn how to understand and communicate how they are thinking and feeling, listen to the feelings of others and identify helpful coping strategies that work for them (such as spending time in nature, listening to music, or talking to a trusted person). When children and young people are learning about climate impacts, particularly for the first time, these conversations may arise naturally and it is therefore important to be prepared by being aware of the range of thoughts and feelings children and young people might be experiencing, as well as your own emotions and beliefs about these issues. It's also important to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for students. Creating space for students to express their thoughts and feelings can help them to feel validated and supported.[9]

When discussing the impact of climate change and mental health-related topics more broadly, educators should be mindful of their own wellbeing, and seek support where appropriate. It may be helpful to reflect on your own thoughts and feelings before exploring these topics with your students or consult with a colleague, such as your designated safeguarding lead or subject leaders in RE, PSHE or Citizenship, who are experienced in facilitating challenging conversations.

Practical tools

Below are some responses that can help in discussions of climate change, as well as others that may risk children and young people feeling invalidated and dismissed.

What helps?	What doesn't help?
Trying to understand and listen to pupils' feelings rather than trying to change or judge them	Trying to remove pupils' distress and uncomfortable emotions by 'correcting beliefs' or replacing worry with hope
Supporting pupils to better understand and cope with their feelings	Telling pupils their feelings are wrong, pointless or 'over the top'
Understanding that pupils' feelings are valuable, valid and real, even if you don't share them to the same extent	Treating pupils' feelings as signs of a disorder or dysfunction
Holding space for uncomfortable emotions and distress while accepting that it can't be fully taken away	Expecting pupils not to be emotionally affected by continued impacts of climate change and inaction by people in power

Adapted from Diffey et al[10]

Links to support and activities can be found on the main webpage.

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