



Climate Change & Children's Health

MENTAL HEALTH

Climate change worsens the existing national mental health emergency in children and adolescents — but talking about climate change and providing support after disasters can help.

SCIENCE SUMMARY

Mental health issues among young people in the last decade have [worsened](#). The intensifying impacts of [human-caused climate change](#) — and the high levels of worry young people report about climate change — coincide with this mental health crisis. In 2021, pediatric mental health experts declared [a state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health](#). [Around 13%](#) of children in the U.S. (age 0-17 years) have a diagnosed mental or behavioral health condition, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Children's mental health is affected by climate change](#) through [displacement](#) or threat of displacement from their homes due to weather or climate disasters, [disrupted stability from school closures](#), and the loss of natural places of personal importance for recreation. [Hotter days can exacerbate existing mental health issues](#), and [exposure to air pollution](#) is a newly understood risk in the development of anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline.

Climate and weather disasters can be [adverse childhood experiences](#) — or potentially traumatic events experienced in childhood that can have lifelong physical and mental health impacts. Children [exposed to weather disasters](#) are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Eco-anxiety, or feelings of distress related to environmental degradation and climate change, is becoming a [more prevalent issue](#) among young people as the climate crisis intensifies. In a survey of more than 15,700 teens and young adults (age 16-25) in the U.S., [nearly 43%](#) reported that climate change had a moderate or greater impact on their mental health. While feelings of anxiety around climate change are normal, persistent anxiety that interferes with daily activities can be a sign of an [anxiety disorder](#).

TOP TAKEAWAYS

- Children and adolescents in the U.S. are facing a mental health emergency, which is intersecting with the intensifying impacts of human-caused climate change.
- Exposure to extreme weather and climate disasters takes a toll on children's mental health — and these events are becoming more frequent and intense due to climate change.
- In a survey of teens and young adults in the U.S., nearly 43% reported that climate change had at least a moderate impact on their mental health.
- Parents and caregivers can help children and teens cope with the psychological effects of climate change by talking about climate change and providing stability following weather disasters.

KEY TERMS

- [Eco-anxiety](#) – Distress relating to environmental degradation and the climate crisis
- [Adverse childhood experiences](#) – potentially traumatic events (including weather disasters) that occur in childhood that can have long-term physical and mental health impacts

CHILDREN & CLIMATE CHANGE

Children are especially sensitive to climate change impacts, in part because they are still growing and developing and they spend more time outdoors. The effects of climate change experienced in childhood can have lifelong consequences on physical and mental health.

Children also have less control over their surrounding environments and less understanding of health risks. They rely on their adult caregivers — from parents and older family members to coaches and teachers — to help protect their health at home, in school, and when recreating outdoors.



Exposure to extreme weather and climate disasters takes a toll on mental health. Parents and caregivers can help children and teens cope by talking about climate change and providing support after disasters. [impacts](#).

WHO'S MOST AT RISK?

Children who experience climate disasters are more at risk for worse health outcomes when those disasters are compounded by [other adverse childhood experiences](#), such as experiencing homelessness or housing instability, food insecurity, or discrimination. Adolescents have also been found to experience greater mental health impacts after [experiencing multiple natural disasters](#).

In response to weather disasters, families with fewer resources [may have more difficulty](#) preparing for evacuation and recovery, as well as [seeking mental health treatment](#) in the aftermath. Limited availability or prohibitive costs of services may [hinder access](#) to mental health counseling, making it difficult to seek a diagnosis or treatment.

PROTECTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Talk about climate change. [Age-appropriate communication](#) about climate change and solutions can help children, teens, and young adults feel less afraid and more hopeful.

Monitor mental health. Know the [symptoms of mental health issues in children](#), especially following traumatic events such as a hurricane, flood, or wildfire. Seek [counseling and support](#) for family members — both [children](#) and adults — as needed.

Be prepared. Households that are physically prepared for weather disasters, with plans and resources for recovery, can minimize their exposure to hazards and reduce stress for the whole family. Learn more about disaster preparedness from [Ready.gov](#).

Provide stability. Displacement or disruptions to routines contribute to stress following a disaster. Maintaining social connections and normal routines, when possible, can help reduce the mental and emotional health impacts.

Commit to rapid, sustained cuts to carbon pollution from burning fossil fuels — now. With continued warming, [future generations](#) are likely to face accelerating change and intensifying risks. Ultimately, cutting carbon pollution is the most meaningful action to slow the rate of warming and set younger generations on a different path, toward a safer future.

Involve children and teens in collective climate action. [Engaging in collective climate action](#), rather than individual action, can help them feel a sense of hope and agency in the face of the climate crisis.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Climate Central's Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- [Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report](#), report by ecoAmerica in collaboration with the American Psychological Association
- Environmental Protection Agency's report, [Climate Change and Children's Health and Well-Being in the United States](#)

Endnotes & Acknowledgements

This is part of a series about climate change and children's health produced by Climate Central.

Thanks to Lisa Patel, MD, of Stanford Children's Health and the [Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health](#), for her contributions.

Climate Central is an independent group of scientists and communicators who research and report the facts about climate change science, impacts, and solutions and how they affect people's lives. We are a policy-neutral 501(c)(3) nonprofit. For more information, visit [climatecentral.org](#)

Published: January 2025