Where is the child in child and adolescent mental health? Priorities for the next 50 years

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10 million children younger than 5 years died in conflicts between 1995 and 2015
Children bear the brunt
Figure 1: Continuum of affectedness

- psychologically healthy and mostly unaffected
- psychologically healthy but experiencing stress
- new cases of subclinical mental distress
- existing and/or new common mental health conditions
- severe psychosocial disability
This young koala has a mental health problem.
COVID-19 is a new crisis

HIV has been a crisis for over 30 years

Mental health is a longstanding care crisis
“The body is itself a kind of place – not a solid object but a terrain through which things pass, and in which they sometimes settle and sediment”

David Abram

“The role of the physician is to translate ‘medically unknown symptoms’ into social problems”

Nanna Mik-Meyer

"The first task of the doctor is ... political: the struggle against disease must begin with a war against bad government“

Michel Foucault
COVID is overexpressed in socially oppressed groups (Marya & Patel)

Mental illness is overexpressed in socially oppressed groups

The solution is not within the viral agent but in addressing the oppression
Research priorities

• National prevalence study – without data no way to plan

• Child participation - recognise and support child and adolescent agency - CitiesRise

• Research on creating more enabling environments – resilient environments
Changing Context: Multiple Factors, Dimensions, & Levels Dynamically Transacting

Dynamics of Health Development: Phases, Trajectories and Outcomes

Dynamic Relational Environment

Behavioral Adaptation
- Responsiveness
- Self-regulation
- Temperament

Biologic Adaptation
- Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis
- Sympathetic Nervous System
- Metabolic Processes
- Inflammatory & Immune Responses
- Allostatic Load

Developmental Adaptation
- Plasticity

Pattern of changes in health assets over time, affected by environmental and intrinsic factors.

Phases of Health Development: The Trajectory of Health Development

1. Latent Effects: Resulting from experiences prior to critical periods that influence health trajectories.
2. Pathway Effects: Resulting from experiences that act to contribute to health development trajectories.
3. Cumulative Effects: Resulting from experiences that accumulate over time and manifest in health states.

PHASES OF HEALTH DEVELOPMENT
- Generativity
- Acquisition
- Maintenance
- Decline
Conceptualisations of childhood
A future for the world’s children?
A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission

"Governments must harness coalitions across sectors to overcome ecological and commercial pressures to ensure children receive their rights and entitlements now and a

GLOBAL LAUNCH
CHILDREN IN ALL POLICIES 2030

Join Children in All Policies 2030 (CAP-2030), leaders, experts and activists from around the world for an energetic conversation about:

- The climate emergency and children's health and well-being
- A new WHO-UNICEF-Lancet documentary on threats to children (world premiere) Watch the trailer
- Messages for Earth Day, the Leaders' Climate Summit and COP-26
Children and adolescents are at risk today like never before

- Recent years have seen improvements in health and education
- But millions still experience violence, hunger, and illness
- New threats have also emerged:
  - ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS to current health and future well-being
  - COMMERCIAL THREATS via targeted marketing of harmful substances
It’s an Emergency
Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey

Caroline Hickman, Elizabeth Marks, Panu Pihkola, Susan Clayton, R. Eric Lewandowski, Eloise E. Mayall, Britt Wray, Catriona Meller, Line van Susteren

Summary

Background Climate change has important implications for the health and futures of children and young people, yet they have little power to limit its harm, making them vulnerable to climate anxiety. This is the first large-scale investigation of climate anxiety in children and young people globally and its relationship with perceived government response.

Methods We surveyed 10,000 children and young people (aged 16–25 years) in ten countries (Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, the UK, and the USA; 1000 participants per country). Invitations to complete the survey were sent via the platform Kantar between May 18 and June 7, 2021. Data were collected on participants’ thoughts and feelings about climate change, and government responses to climate change. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each aspect of climate anxiety, and Pearson’s correlation analysis was done to evaluate whether climate-related distress, functioning, and negative beliefs about climate change were linked to thoughts and feelings about government response.

Findings Respondents across all countries were worried about climate change (59% were very or extremely worried and 84% were at least moderately worried). More than 50% reported each of the following emotions: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. More than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and many reported a high number of negative thoughts about climate change (eg, 75% said that they think the future is frightening and 83% said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet). Respondents rated government responses to climate change negatively and reported greater feelings of betrayal than of reassurance. Climate anxiety and distress were correlated with perceived inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal.

Interpretation Climate anxiety and dissatisfaction with government responses are widespread in children and young people in countries across the world and impact their daily functioning. A perceived failure by governments to respond to the climate crisis is associated with increased distress. There is an urgent need for further research into the emotional impact of climate change on children and young people and for governments to validate their distress by taking urgent action on climate change.

Supporting young people with climate anxiety: mitigation, adaptation, and resilience

“The future is frightening” for 75% of children and young people (age 16–25 years), according to the following results of Caroline Hickman and colleagues. Ten-country survey published in the Lancet Planetary Health. Climate anxiety among young people, they rightfully argue, can only be truly mitigated if those in power take meaningful action to address climate change. As governments continue to stall, parents, teachers, and mental health professionals need evidence-based strategies to support young people with climate anxiety in their communities, yet as communities expand irrigation systems in response to drier land, we need strategies of adaptation that promote mental well-being among young people experiencing the effects of climate change. Just as build storm walls in anticipation of extreme weather, we need strategies of psychological resilience to prepare young people with the strengths they will need to face the impending threats of their future. It is reassuring that older generations often respond to young people’s climate concerns in thoughtful and empathetic ways.11 Because the existing tools for addressing more pathological forms of anxiety and measuring the unique, non-psychological experience of climate anxiety among children and young people. Their work should also catalyse efforts in defining and measuring psychological adaptation and resilience to give communities appropriate benchmarks in supporting mental health in children and young people. In extending preliminary work on coping to a global scale, we might better understand what mental wellbeing looks like for children and young people confronting challenges related to climate change and create more effective forms of community-level and interpersonal support that are relevant, validating, and empowering. It is completely unfair to ask a generation of young people to develop enhanced psychological stamina to face climate change. But because of decades of inaction on the part of previous generations, they are being asked to do so. We owe it to children and young people to prioritise mitigation of climate change at its source, while at the same time investing in evidence-based tools to support their mental wellbeing in the face of this ongoing crisis. In the process, we might see the generation of young people living in this era of unprecedented uncertainty become the most resilient generation yet.


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We require a strategy that puts children and adolescents at the center.
Their needs becoming a lens through which decisions are considered and made

In the short and long term
Thank you
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Priorities for child and adolescent mental health research and services in South Africa

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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