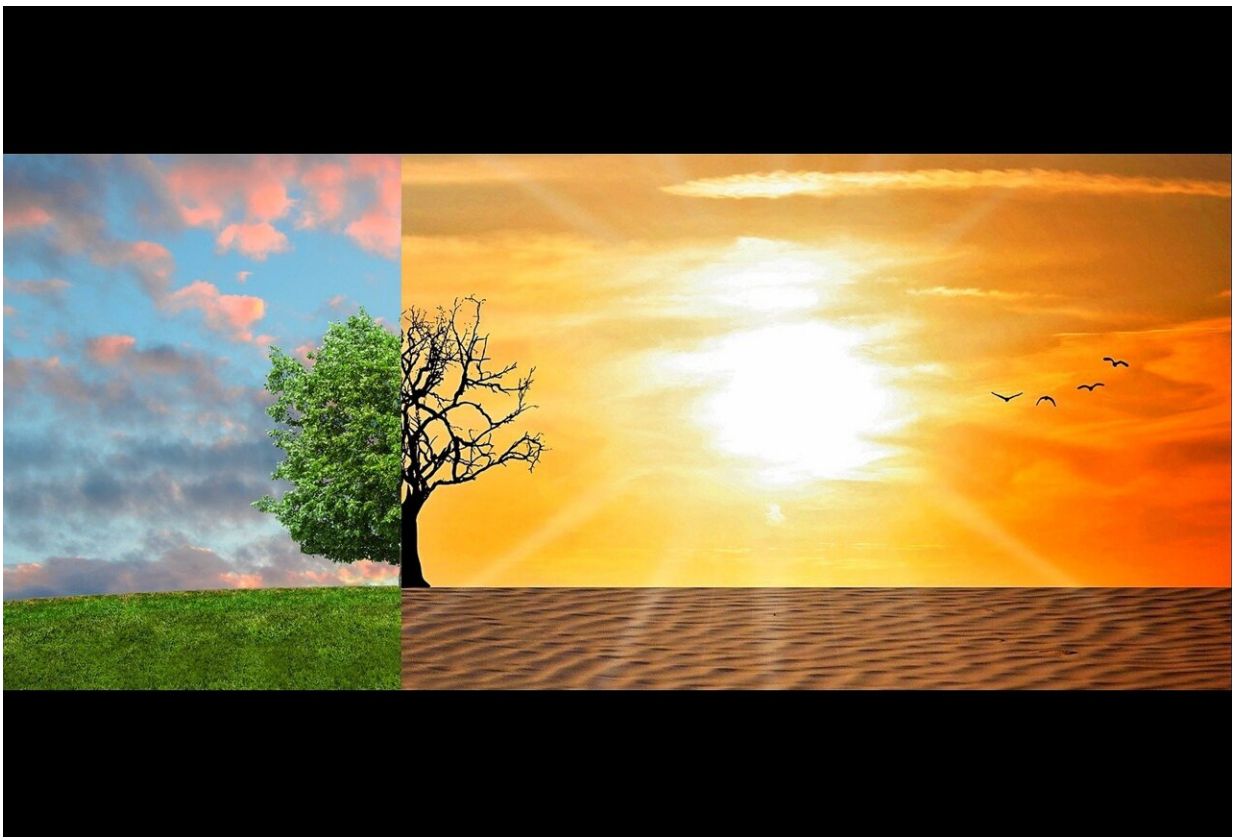


Ask the Pediatrician: What changes can families make to mitigate the effects of climate change?

November 21 2022, by Rebecca Philipsborn



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Q: The news about climate change is overwhelming. Are there steps average people can take that actually make a difference?

A: Climate change can be scary and overwhelming for children and families. It causes harm from storms, wildfires, emerging illnesses and heat and air pollution. Many of these harms build upon one another to worsen [child health](#).

If the problem feels overwhelming, you aren't alone. Recently, 10,000 people ages 16 to 25 from 10 countries were surveyed about [climate change](#) and government responses to climate change. Over half said they felt sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless and guilty; 83% agreed that people have failed to take care of the planet.

The good news is some of the actions needed to reduce climate change will improve children's health. It will take big changes to shift toward [clean energy](#) and away from polluting [energy sources](#) and activities. But even small choices that parents and kids make every day can have a big impact—and, in turn, are better for our health.

For example, choosing to spend time in nature and [green spaces](#) is good for a child's physical and mental health. And adding more [green space](#) with trees for shade reduces extreme heat in cities.

In the United States, two sources—electricity and transportation—cause the most greenhouse gas emissions. The greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels for electricity and transportation collect in the earth's atmosphere. The use of [fossil fuels](#) for energy also causes pollution on the ground and in our neighborhoods.

Shifting to renewable energy, like solar and wind power, improves air quality. This change will help children breathe less polluted air and improve children's health now and in the future. Cleaner air can improve birth outcomes and children's cardiovascular, respiratory and neurologic health.

Biking, walking and public transportation also help keep the air clean and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Choosing active and alternative transportation can help connect people with their communities and boost their physical fitness.

Some types of food, including red meat, contribute more to climate change and are less healthy for children. Food waste also releases a potent greenhouse gas called methane into the air that worsens climate change.

Some diet changes to consider:

- Focus on [healthy food choices](#) rich in plant-based nutrition to help fight climate change and reduce your child's risk of chronic diseases.
- Incorporate local, fresh and plant-based foods.
- Eat less red meat.
- Avoid processed foods, processed sugars and processed meats.
- To reduce [food waste](#), plan meals, cut back on the amount of food you buy and eat leftovers or foods that will spoil first so you do not have to throw them away.

Try these other health-boosting actions that also help the Earth:

- Start a backyard compost bin or participate in your community's compost program where available.
- Choose walking and biking and public transportation when possible and when it's safe.
- Support "safe routes to school" programs.
- Speak up at town council and school board meetings about the benefits of electric or alternative-fuel school buses and other changes for cleaner air in your community.
- Weatherize your home to save on energy use and save money.

- Consider rooftop [solar panels](#) or support clean energy through your utility company.
- Advocate for green building design for community projects, schools and new construction.
- Encourage outdoor play and programs that support access to nature for children.
- Consider an electric vehicle or electric bicycle.
- Support your child if they want to get involved in a local green youth organization. Help them plant trees and recycle and reuse when possible.
- Choose the most environmentally friendly option when purchasing something. Buy local when you can to avoid the transportation needed to deliver an item a long distance to your home and to cut the packaging involved.

Many of these health-promoting actions are not affordable or available for all children and families, of course. Children of color and those in low-income communities are the least likely to have access to these resources. They also are more exposed to climate changes that worsen their health.

If you are concerned about health effects of climate change, ask your pediatrician. All of us can work with community leaders to make sure that the voices and needs of all children are considered in actions that address climate change.

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Citation: Ask the Pediatrician: What changes can families make to mitigate the effects of climate change? (2022, November 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-pediatrician-families-mitigate-effects-climate.html>

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