

Report: Impacts of climate change threaten children's mental health starting before birth

October 11 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Climate change poses a particular threat to children and youth, starting before birth and potentially derailing the normal development of physiological systems, cognitive abilities and emotional skills in ways that are sometimes irreversible, according to a report released by the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica.

The impacts of [climate change](#) intersect with and compound other factors that threaten youth mental health, which is already precarious, according to the "[Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report 2023](#)." These factors include [child development](#), parental health, rates of depression and suicide, anxiety, racism, poverty, housing security, adequate nutrition and access to medical care.

The acute impacts of climate change, such as weather disasters, can cause trauma and [posttraumatic stress disorder](#) in the short term, and many longer-term [mental health challenges](#) in the absence of proper interventions, the report says. Children are more vulnerable because of their dependence on parents and other caregivers for support.

"If our responsibility to ensure a safe climate and thriving future for our children and future generations was not clear enough, this report brings it into vivid relief. My hope is for anyone caring for children—especially policymakers—to join me in following its guidance," said Meighen Speiser, executive director of ecoAmerica and a co-author of the report.

Research shows that the effect of extreme weather events resulting from

climate change can interrupt normal fetal development and lead to a greater risk of anxiety or [depressive disorder](#), ADHD, educational deficits, and lower levels of self-control, as well as psychiatric disorders later in life. The list of possible climate change-related mental health struggles expands as children get older, according to the report. And certain populations of children are even more vulnerable due to poverty, racism, gender, disability and other factors.

Youth are increasingly feeling frustrated and betrayed by poor governmental response to climate change, the report notes. However, despite rampant climate anxiety, many are motivated to be a part of climate solutions as evidenced by a recent surge in marches and protests. This new report builds on the prior Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Inequities, and Responses report, published in 2021, and also developed by ecoAmerica and APA.

Solutions to support children and youth mental health include:

- Systems-level solutions to tackle climate change at its root.
- Community solutions to increase resilience, meet children's basic needs and increase access to mental health care.
- School-based support and hands-on opportunities to act.
- Screenings by [health care professionals](#) to identify climate-related distress and treatment interventions.
- Parental support, to teach their children about climate change, manage their fears, find hope, take age-appropriate action and nurture their capacity for resilience.

"Since the publication of the 2021 report, concerns about the mental health impacts of climate change have grown among scientists, [health professionals](#), policymakers and the public, and the effects on children and youth are more pronounced," said APA CEO Arthur C. Evans Jr., Ph.D. "Psychology, as the science of behavior, will be pivotal to making

the wholesale changes that are imperative to slow and, we hope, stop its advance."

"Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report 2023," which synthesizes the results of hundreds of scientific papers, serves as a resource for anyone seeking information about the impact of climate change on the [mental health](#) of children and youth.

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Report: Impacts of climate change threaten children's mental health starting before birth (2023, October 11) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-10-impacts-climate-threaten-children-mental.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--