



DON'T HIT THE PANIC BUTTON

Nathaniel McCullagh, Managing Director of Simply Learning Education, explores the growing issue of eco-anxiety among children and shares practical advice for parents on how to help them become socially responsible citizens

Our climate has changed and much of this change is adversely affecting people and nature. You only need to look around at the parched landscape this summer, or see images of the devastating wildfires, to see how acute the situation has become. Parents and schools must reassure children that things can improve – and give them agency to act.

What is eco-anxiety?

Eco-anxiety describes the physical and mental distress caused by watching the climate crisis unfold in front of our eyes. It illustrates how many of us feel both intensely overwhelmed by what we see and acutely anxious about the future. It encapsulates our feelings of dread, fear, senselessness and above all, the powerlessness that many of us now feel in the face of climate change.

The impact on children and young people is particularly profound. The largest global survey of eco-anxiety in young people polled 10,000 young people aged 16 to 25 across 10 countries. The results, published in *The Lancet* in December 2021 showed that nearly 60% of young people are ‘very’ or ‘extremely worried’ about environmental problems, 45% reported a negative impact of these emotions on daily functioning such as eating, concentrating, sleeping, going to school, and playing and 75% believe that the future is frightening.

But children are hugely resilient and with the right support and resources, they have the potential to develop remarkable grit and strength to cope with challenges. The key is to give them a sense of agency, the belief that they can be part of the solution.



“The most important thing is to make sure that children are well informed. There’s no point in simply telling them that all will be well. They need to be part of the conversation. We’ve launched initiatives such as sustainability club, climate awareness day and Earth Day. We can’t pretend that climate change isn’t happening, but we can encourage them to make a difference.”

**Tom Dawson, Headmaster
Sunningdale School**

What can schools and parents do to help?

If your child’s worry is that ‘everything will burn up’ or ‘all the animals will die’, you can explain that these things aren’t true – or aren’t coming true soon. Tangible, precise facts help ground younger children, preventing fears from overwhelming them. Give them some achievable actions to do to help in and around the home (see boxout). And reassure them that there are lots of clever grown-ups working on solutions and that their generation will be part of those solutions.

Make space for feelings

Eco-anxiety is a rational reaction to climate change. Don’t dismiss your child’s concerns, allow them to ask tough questions and make space for them to talk.

A 2025 *TIME* report found that nearly 62% of young people try to talk about

climate change but also 58% feel ignored or dismissed – highlighting just how crucial these conversations are.

It’s ok not to have all the answers, what’s important is keeping the lines of communication open. Try asking: ‘What have you been hearing about climate change?’ or ‘What worries you most about this?’ rather than immediately offering them solutions or reassurance.

Build climate literacy in your child

It’s important to educate young people about where they source their information on climate change. Make sure they understand that it’s important to be informed by the scientists and climate researchers who know what is happening. Share age-appropriate resources with your children. For younger children this might be books or videos from organisations like National Geographic Kids, BBC Bitesize, or WWF. For older children you could explore IPCC reports for youth, government climate data, or reputable news sources together. And parents don’t need to be climate experts themselves. When a child asks a question,



Immersing children in nature gives them an appreciation and respect for the planet

“We know that understanding about climate change cannot be addressed by adding another topic to the curriculum. Instead, it must be woven through every aspect of school life.”
**Alexandra Haydon, Headteacher,
Francis Holland School, Sloane Square**

Encouraging curiosity rather than panic will empower children to make positive, impactful changes



“Much of the eco-anxiety experienced by young people stems from a deeper and unspoken disconnection from the natural world. In schools, our task shouldn’t simply be to teach about environmental issues, but to help children rediscover their place within nature.”

**Guy Ayling, Headmaster,
Mount Kelly School**

respond with, ‘That’s a great question, let’s find out’ and then use a source such as the Met Office or The Royal Society, home to the world’s most eminent scientists, which has an excellent website section on climate change. This approach models active curiosity and critical thinking.

Tailor the conversation

Children as young as five or six are noticing environmental changes and may ask questions. Focus on what they can understand and what they can do – like planting a tree or recycling their rubbish.

For example, a six year old might ask ‘Why is it so hot?’ You could respond: ‘The Earth is getting warmer because of things people are doing, like driving cars and using lots of energy. Scientists are working on ways to help the Earth cool down, and lots of people are making changes to help.’

Choose positivity

It’s essential that children and adults choose stories that inspire rather than leave them feeling hopeless.

There are hundreds of inspirational accounts across social media.

UK Instagram accounts to follow include:
@sambentley – upbeat and educational news about sustainability

@kneppwildland – our most successful rewilding story in the UK. A new beaver kit will cheer anyone up

@goinggreenmedia – full of inspirational eco-activism by a UK duo

Or further afield:

@theoceancleanup – modern tech solutions to the plastic choking our oceans

@oceanconservationnamibia – films of volunteers releasing Cape Fur seals trapped in nets discarded by the fishing industry
@sungaiwatch – an account following a family cleaning up Indonesia’s rivers.

These positive stories matter because they make us feel less alone and make us feel hopeful not only that there are people doing things to combat the crisis, but also that something can be done.

Take action

Action is the antidote to anxiety. Developing agency in your child is key to tackling eco-anxiety. Often, motivation follows action, rather than the other way around; the more you do, the more you see that you can do.

Age-appropriate actions might include:

- Ages five to eight: Planting seeds, feeding birds, reducing food waste at home, creating ‘save the planet’ artwork (*see boxout*)
- Ages nine to 12: Starting an environmental club, organising litter picks, writing to local councillors, learning about renewable energy
- Ages 13+: Joining youth climate groups like Force of Nature or the Climate Majority Project. Join the Teen Rangers, the youth programme run by The Wildlife Trusts in the UK, explore climate careers or engage with local climate policy. 🌱

10 WAYS TO SAVE THE WORLD

Things parents can do to help children develop agency around climate change at home

- 1. Get campaigning**
It’s never too early to be an eco-activist. Your child can write to their MP or send them a picture.
- 2. Reduce, reuse, recycle**
Ask for help with recycling. Use refillable products where possible.
- 3. Get outside into nature**
Nature reduces anxiety. Get involved in the Big Garden Birdwatch.
- 4. Change what and how you eat**
Eat only what’s in season and introduce a plant-based, meat-free dinner at least once a week.
- 5. Reduce food waste**
Start composting
- 6. Change how you travel**
Walk, cycle or scoot to school, or use a car share. Suggest travelling by rail on the next family holiday.
- 7. Change your water use**
Get the family to take shorter showers and treat baths as a luxury. Get a water butt to collect rainwater.
- 8. Change your energy use**
Turn off lights, unplug chargers, don’t leave the TV on standby. Put your child in charge of policing this.
- 9. Buy second-hand everything!**
Instead of the latest iPhone. Buy your child a reconditioned phone from Back Market or a Fairphone.
- 10. Plant a small garden**
Encourage your child to grow a small tree or veggies. These will provide food and help absorb carbon dioxide.