

[SCHOOL MANAGEMENT](#)

Ecoanxiety: A Pervasive Traumatic Experience Affecting Students

For many young (and older for that matter) people around the world, our real-life reality is just that – a nightmare about our ecological destiny. A nightmare that doesn't end when you wake up. But what can we do about this real-life nightmare? How can we ease our students' anxiety about the world? Below is a 'tip sheet' on how to put our students at ease and put them more in control of their future.

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The students work with Mrs Molly Everett and Mrs Ashleigh Emery to prepare for National Tree Day

As Time magazine (Worland, 2022) noted, "Climate is Everything," and in relation to environmental issues teachers have been quietly discussing global warming and pollution with their students probably longer than most groups in our communities. So, it is not surprising that students' awareness of the failure to reverse many of these damaging environmental trends, along with the pandemic health issues that have impacted on our societies and schools are now being manifested as stress factors impacting on students' and their families' lives. In this context the American Psychological Association has now recognised the traumatic conditions of eco-anxiety, ecological anxiety, eco-distress, and climate anxiety on young people.

Trauma and Globally Induced Anxiety

When growing-up many students suffer a variety of anxieties, and with the advent of television, mobile phones and reality-based computer games children can have a more informed view of the global situation. In fact, in the 1950s and 60s American students practised taking shelter from Russian missiles, and one can only imagine the effect that this practice had on the students' state of anxiety. These days the realistic computer games reinforce morally deficient virtual killing, and we wonder where the humanist balance gets screen time. However, barely a new broadcast is delivered without some mention of carbon dioxide, global warming and pollution, so it is little wonder that this next generation is becoming anxious about the future.

Eco-Anxiety

Have you ever had a dream (by dream we mean nightmare) where something is happening that is out of your control? Maybe you're behind the wheel of a speeding car and when you go to slam on the brakes nothing happens. Maybe, your biggest fear (e.g. snakes, spiders, clowns) is rapidly approaching and it seems that your feet are almost glued to the ground and you are unable to run away. Luckily, these dreams usually end abruptly with you waking up in a hot sweat or to the sound of your alarm or something to that effect. The difference between these nightmares and reality is just that, one is a dream, and one is reality. Our reality. The problem is, for many young (and older for that matter) people around the world, our real-life reality is just that – a nightmare. A nightmare that doesn't end when you wake up. But what can we do about this real-life nightmare? How can we ease our students' anxiety about the world? Below is a 'tip sheet' if you will, on how to put our students at ease and put them more in control of their future.

The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as "the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and that of next generations" (Iberdrola, n.d.). However, it must be acknowledged that environmental issues have caused a degree of anxiety for hundreds of years. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, and his description of the mythical Coketown elicited little joy from the impact of industrialisation:

"... a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage" (Dickens, 1966, p. 17).

In England, the BBC Future: The Family Tree (2022) has featured eco-anxiety in their article titled: How can we help kids cope with 'eco-anxiety'? In this article they, too, drew attention to the dangers of Victorian industrialisation and the development of eco-anxiety:

'... in the 19th century, the Victorians worried about growth-stunting, lung-choking black smoke from coal-burning in the UK. But as human activity increases the risk of extreme weather, including heatwaves, droughts and flooding, and as the United Nations warns of a "code red for humanity", surveys show that kids are suffering from climate anxiety at even higher rates than adults – including feelings of worry, fear, anger, grief, despair, guilt and shame.'

However, impressive data from The Lancet (Hickman et al, 2021), gives readers an understanding of the size of this anxiety problem in many countries.

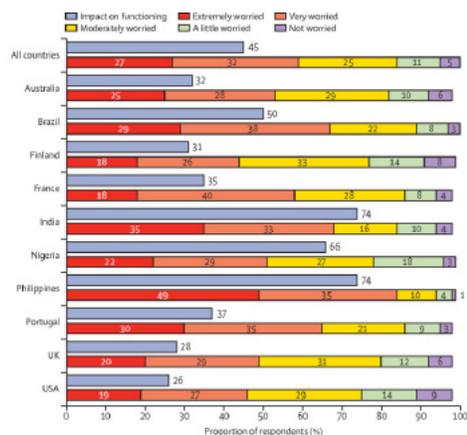


Figure 1 Worry about climate change and impact on functioning.

The graph shows the proportion of the sample reporting a negative impact on functioning from their feelings about climate change and various levels of worry about climate change.

Data are shown for the whole sample (n=107000) and by country (n=1000 per country). (Hickman et al, 2021).

Clearly, ecoanxiety is an issue that, as teachers, we must address now.

Emotional Coaching in the Classroom

Teachers, in many cases, spend as much face-to-face time with children as they do with their parents. The Latin legal term, *parentis in loco*, sometimes extends beyond the legal limitations as teachers support their troubled

students. Dylan Gee, a professor who is quoted in the BBC article (2022) "examined how families coped during the pandemic. She found that parents' emotion coaching buffered the effects of the stress during this difficult time, so that it had less of an effect on the children's mental health". Importantly, while the BBC article was written for parents, teachers can take directions from the researchers' conclusions:

'Noel and her doctoral student Maria Pavlova have now designed a short training programme on the best ways to have more constructive conversations. Parents are advised to avoid talking too much about the physical pain. Instead, they were encouraged to focus on the more positive elements of the experience and to praise the child for the ways they had managed to cope with their discomfort' (BBC, 2022).

Paraphrasing the work of Harriet Shugarman, the BBC article suggests how this anxiety can be addressed:

Table 1 Harriet Shugarman's Age-Appropriate Advice (BBC- The Family, 2022).

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| Very young children | The first step is to create "a sense of wonder in nature" – watching ants in the grass on outings to city parks, or sharing stories and songs. Include your five-to- six-year-old kids in climate marches, take photos of the protests, and have kids send their own drawings or letters to local officials |
| Ages of 10–13 years old | They are probably learning about climate change in school. Encourage them to discuss climate change with teachers, neighbours and family, Shugarman says. Also, "we can remind them that there are so many scientists |
| Ages 14–16 years old | Teenagers are approaching the age at which they'll be able to vote. "Their elected officials are interested in what they have to say because they are future voters," Shugarman says. Political engagement for older teens is crucial. "So many young people seem so disillusioned, rightly so, perhaps, with our democracies. But they are very fragile and we need them to be participatory." |

Within the curriculum constraints and school policies teachers should address children's anxieties.

Greta Thunberg: Blah, Blah, Blah!

The young Swedish environment activist, Greta Thunberg, has captured world-wide attention with her bold stance on environmental issues. In relation to a meeting of world leaders on climate change and global warming, Damian Carrington (2021) from the British daily, The Guardian said Greta "has excoriated global leaders over their promises to address the climate emergency, dismissing them as "blah, blah, blah".

'Build back better. Blah, blah, blah. Green economy. Blah blah blah. Net zero by 2050. Blah, blah, blah," she said in a speech to the Youth4Climate summit in Milan, Italy, on Tuesday. "This is all we hear from our so-called leaders. Words that sound great but so far have not led to action. Our hopes and ambitions drown in their empty promises.'

Thunberg has shown the way for young people to express their concerns politically.

The Australian Curriculum

While many states have their own versions of a curriculum, the Australian curriculum provides a starting point of learning expectations. Reporting on the newly released Australian curriculum (v.9) The Conversation (2022) makes the point:

'The old curriculum had a total of four explicit references to "climate change". Whether it was covered in the classroom depended on the knowledge and beliefs of teachers. In the new curriculum we counted 32 references to climate change across diverse subject areas: civics and citizenship, geography, history, science, mathematics,

technologies, and the arts. This means students have more opportunities to learn about climate change, and teachers have more direction on where and how to teach it.'

However, based on their research, The Conversation (2022) warns:

'The new curriculum does not adequately acknowledge or act on the significant emotional impacts of growing up in a changing climate. This leaves teachers, who may become the bearers of bad news to many students, in a difficult position. In our interviews with teachers they told us they don't feel confident to teach about climate change or to manage their students' anxiety as they discover how climate change will affect their futures.'

With this in mind, we have worked at our classroom level to reduce our students' anxiety and build their resilience.

Classroom activities

Reducing students' eco anxiety and building resilience while educating and informing students on the impact of climate change is a delicate balancing act. Teachers who do not feel confident to teach about climate change will do too little, resulting in students potentially growing up with a lack of awareness and urgency of these pressing issues. How will we rely on the next generation to make sustainable choices if we as teachers have not nurtured their innate desire to care for the world around us? On the other hand, educators who focus too heavily on teaching about climate damage that has already been done, without careful consideration of Harriet Shugarman's Age-Appropriate Advice, run the risk of instilling a feeling of 'doom and gloom' in young people. A sense of helplessness where students leave school and are approaching the age to vote, but feel that climate change is an unstoppable beast and there is nothing they can do to defeat it.

Ellenbrook Primary School's approach to teaching about climate change without adding any further stress on the students, is to connect the students with nature, inspire the next generation, and inform about environmental stewardship. We do this through a variety of curriculum based activities, and by involving our school community in uplifting initiatives such as National Tree Day, where each class is responsible for the plantation and care of their own fruit tree on the school grounds. Furthermore, students participate in daily sustainable practices such as composting and recycling, and battle it out between classes in our weekly Waste Wise Wednesday competition, whereby students must reduce their plastic waste by bringing a 'waste wise' lunchbox. Through these practical means, the students at EPS feel empowered and are developing lifelong sustainable habits (Saker & MacNeill, 2020).

Table 2 Addressing Students' Ecoanxiety

| Area | Information | What could that look and sound like in the classroom? |
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| Questioning | <p><i>How is the student (specifically) feeling?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are they angry and frustrated? • Do they feel helpless? • Are they ill-informed or confused on what climate change is? <p>Maybe they're all three. Maybe they've hit the trifecta.</p> | <p><i>Example questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think climate change is? (give an accurate, age appropriate answer). • Do you think that there is nothing that you can do to help reduce climate change? (Answers can be given from the last section of this table). |

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| Reasoning | <p><i>Why are they feeling like this?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zone in on what it is exactly that the student is anxious/angry/overwhelmed etc about. | <p>Teachers find out the reason behind their feelings.</p> <p>For example: If they are afraid, get to the root of what they're actually afraid of. Is it being out of control of the situation? Do they feel that the world "leaders" aren't doing their best to change the direction of this? Do they feel that there is nothing that they can do to help change our climate for the better?</p> |
| Validation | <p><i>Validate the students' feelings.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to them that their feelings and questions are important, and it is a positive thing that they care enough about their planet to want change for it. | <p>"Tell her it's a brilliant question", she says, and add: "I want you to feel proud of those feelings. Because you only feel that anxiety or worry because you care about the planet." Hickman, 2022.</p> |
| Education is Key | <p>Teachers and other adults such as parents, are strongly encouraged to use accurate, age-appropriate language and definitions when discussing climate change. Engaging videos, informative books and relevant excursions are also key in education our students on climate change.</p> | <p>Book recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to Teach your kids about climate change • The Mess we Made • You Can Change the World • Change Starts With Us <p>School Excursions and Incursions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local recycling centre • Local landfill site • Local climate change activist speaker |
| Honesty is the Best Policy | <p>It is important for teachers and other adults such as parents and guardians, to have an open dialogue with their children, that is honest and age appropriate.</p> <p>Adopt the "real questions... require real answers" approach.</p> <p>Hickman, 2022.</p> | <p>"So when a 10-year-old child asks, "is it true that in 100 years the Earth will be burned to a crisp?" it's "not pure fantasy", Hickman says. "It's not, 'Mummy, can sharks fly?' The question is grounded in reality." Hickman, 2022.</p> |

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| <p>Future Leaders Walk the Walk</p> | <p>Embed in students' minds that their feelings, opinions and thoughts matter. They are valid. And not only do they matter, their passion and drive can be used to help in fight climate change. They should be made to feel inspired and courageous.</p> | <p>What can students do at their level? Nothing? Wrong!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ride in the car less – walk, ride your bike or carpool to school whenever you can • Walk to school day each week, month, year (start small, think big!) • Turn the lights off, heaters and aircon off when they are not needed or when you leave the room • Plant trees – national tree day • Cutting down on your meat and dairy intake • Put a jumper on – it might be enough to warm you up and you may not need to use the heater • Open the blinds – this may be all the light you need, you may not need to turn the light on • Turn the tap off properly • Use a shower timer to reduce your water wastage • Compost organic waste to reduce landfill |
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Conclusions

We, as teachers must use our eco-pedagogical awareness to educate our students on the positive effects that they can have on their environment, and teach them that you don't have to be world leaders to make world changes. Let's continue to inspire our future leaders on ways to reduce their carbon footprint. It's time to wake up from this nightmare. It's time to take control of the wheel and tackle this feared creature head on. Consider this a collective wake-up call. It's time to get up and get going. Now! And, let's work with our students as informed partners who can make a difference and allow them to control their exploding ecoanxiety.

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