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No Zen for Gen X-Tinction

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Children and teenagers everywhere are worried about the climate crisis — often unhappily so. Why should parents try to ease their anxiety, and how? Or should they save their energy for action?

Hundreds of millions of children are growing up immersed in the pessimism that surrounds the climate crisis. Many of them, notably Greta Thunberg, have done much more than worry; they have joined and led the fight for a green energy revolution.

But what are the costs — both psychological and ethical — attached to our global culture's increasing frankness with youngsters about the ecological unsustainability of the civilisation they are preparing to inherit from us?

According to a recent survey of 100 000 young people around the globe, nearly 60% of respondents were 'very worried' or 'extremely worried' about climate. And the anxiety seems far from confined to rich countries like Thunberg's Sweden. In fact, the kids of the global south are even more climate-anxious than their northern peers. The issue is "very worrying" or "extremely worrying" to 84% of youth in the Philippines, 68% in India and 67% in Brazil — all bigger majorities than were surveyed in Europe or North America. In other words, it's not a middle-class problem.

What aggravates all this tension is the fact that despite the efforts of Thunberg and the Extinction Rebellion movement, children remain relatively powerless to drive climate-policy change. They do not wield the small but concrete tools to create change that adults wield. They cannot vote out climate-destructive leaders. They have relatively little power to make green choices about the products they consume — especially if they grow up in poor families where all choices are limited. They cannot move the policy needle through the agency of their careers, which have not begun, or by migrating to a country or city where greener policies prevail.

Yes, they can protest and agitate and express their anger and fear. But if the last two decades have taught us anything, it's that you cannot cut carbon emissions merely by describing the problem, however urgently you describe it.

That means a generation is being formed by the frustration of economic and political impotence combined with an ambient existential dread: that's a precarious emotional foundation for a young life, and one I don't want to bequeath to my own youngsters who are still young enough to remain blithely ignorant of the crisis.

Robin Sandler, a clinical psychologist in Auckland, New Zealand, has given psychotherapy to teenagers for two decades. He says that child depression or anxiety about climate change is a real phenomenon, but can be hard to separate from the personal sphere. "It's complex to tease out which form of sadness or dysphoria is truly related to wider social issues, including climate change, and how much of it is much closer to home — about the relationships a young person has with the two or three people they're closest to," says Sandler. "Those relationships normally dominate their experience. Having said that, I do think that there is an impact on teenagers today from the idea that there's an endpoint, that the Earth's resources are finite and in fact have in many ways been pushed to the limits, and that life on Earth can't extend uninterruptedly."

Even a very remote prospect of disaster can upset children deeply, says Sandler. He remembers feeling "very bereft and anguished" himself as a child, when he was first told that our solar system's sun will eventually die, albeit millions of years from now.

The natural impulse of most parents is to shield children from any painful insight we can postpone, and we can legitimately choose to steer dinner-table conversations away from the demise of the sun. But can we ethically justify hiding from them the reality of a baking planet, with no guarantees we can open the oven door, even if we try our best to do so?

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How old should a child be in order to healthily process that knowledge? And do parents even have the right to make that determination?

Sandler says that children are in general less able than adults to deceive themselves about the seriousness of a crisis they observe. “They certainly don’t have the same types of defences that adults have; they respond more viscerally.”

Between the ages of seven and 11, during the concrete operational phase in which rational thinking emerges, a child’s world can be very rule-bound, with little room for paradox or nuance. “Younger children often swallow what their parents think about an issue like climate change,” says Sandler.

“But adolescents usually form their own opinions and can be quite oppositional to whatever their parents think. So if their parents choose just to recycle and drive a hybrid car, then their teenagers might be radically vegan, never set foot in a petrol-powered car, and imply that their parents are liberal sellouts who are actually destroying the world anyway. Or they might swing to the other side and say the climate change cause is missing the point. Adolescents tend toward maximalism,” he says.

Thunberg combines that rebellious energy with the intense focus associated with autism, which she has described as her “superpower”. “She is obviously an inspirational figure, who somehow latched onto the climate as her obsession,” says Sandler. “And it gave her a voice and a place in the world that she maybe was struggling to find otherwise. That doesn’t make her voice any less legitimate.”

For parents who are not consciously worried about much else besides the climate — from money to relationships to politics — an undiluted focus on the carbon-dioxide content of the atmosphere can seem misplaced. But everybody chooses their own psychological poison. “One could say there’s only so much anxiety that the human mind can tolerate,” says Sandler. “We all have to negotiate the array of anxieties that are in front of us. And we have to find ones that we can work with, because to really open one’s mind to all of them is too much.”

His simplest piece of advice to parents of children who suffer from anxiety disorders is to try to be a soothing and comforting presence in their lives. In the particular case of climate anxiety, that role could involve emphasising the possibility of real solutions without being denialist. “Even though the climate situation is pretty scary, it’s not hopeless. There are a huge number of initiatives around the world to make things better,” says Sandler. “They’re not yet winning the war, but there’s a huge amount of goodwill out there. Some of the cure will be technological, and new technologies are quite amazing. Behaviour change will play a part, and ordinary people’s views are changing.”

In Australia, for example, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s devotion to coal mining is increasingly outflanked by public opinion in the glow of an escalating bushfire crisis. That shift will inevitably filter through to concrete policy.

The sheer scale of history can be hard for children to process, and they may not be aware of past victories in protecting the environment. Many may not be aware of the story of the closing of the ozone hole, or know that many animal species, from whales to wolves, that are now flourishing were close to extinction during the past century. Our assault on nature was in many ways far more destructive than it is now.

Some children will appreciate these attempts to provide perspective and optimism. Others, with good reason, will pay more attention to what we do rather than what we say. They know the price of too much hot air.