

## *Overcoming Fear for the Future Generations*

By: Meghan McAnarney

Growing up during the climate crisis has enhanced in intensity over the years. As a child, I knew climate change in terms of Miley Cyrus' hit song *Wake Up America* and Disney Channel's *Friends For Change* project. Having grown significantly since, and studying environmental education as well as the impacts of the climate crisis on children, I have become increasingly worried for the youth of today and the pressure that has been placed upon their shoulders. Previously, I interned as an Environmental Activities Coordinator at a local summer camp in my hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina. The experiences that I had there led me to realize that children are currently facing much more daunting challenges and impacts from the climate crisis than any other generation before. Children now require comprehension and coping skills in relation to understanding the state of the globe in order to protect their mental and emotional wellbeing. If you are like me- wondering if bringing a child into the world someday will lead to unsafe outcomes, questioning adding to the ever increasing population that plagues the earth's natural resources, and needing answers to what can be done to aid the livelihoods of future generations- then buckle up because that is exactly what we will be diving into! Here we will cultivate comfort together by fleshing out climate anxieties in relation to both having children and being a child during this time period.

### **The Evolution of Climate Awareness in Children**

The global climate crisis has altered the perception of life for humans, especially children, in an abundance of ways that vary across the globe. I remember as a small girl being aware of global warming, but never fully grasping the impacts any deeper than the endangerment of my older sister's favorite animal, the polar bear, and a rise in heat waves that kept me from playing outside. Having had the opportunity to educate children on the environment in order to

aid in human relationships with the earth has altered my personal perception of the climate crisis in many ways. Now, my thoughts are consumed by the climate crisis in terms of mass species extinction, displacement as a result of increased storm severity, resource conflict, and what kind of world new humans will be entering.

The physical impacts, resulting from human influenced global warming, experienced by the youth of today as opposed to a decade ago are vastly different. When I look back on being a Camp Counselor and an intern as an Environmental Activities Coordinator, I get flashes of so many fond memories that are accompanied by a sense of stress and sadness. I distinctly remember many campers being extremely hesitant and irritated when told that we would be playing outdoors, and I absolutely could not blame them because I, too, was internally very hesitant and annoyed when told that I would have to lead games outdoors. As a child, my siblings and I adored being outside as much as possible, but the heat of today is (for lack of a better word) disgusting. It became common for the campers to get heat rashes, sunburns, and headaches from being exposed to so much sun and heat.

On a globalized scale, the climate crisis has severely threatened the rights of children across the world. UNICEF has provided the public with an accessible array of information that has depicted ways in which the climate crisis is a children's rights crisis. Currently, "503 million children now live in areas at extremely high risk of floods due to extreme weather events" including tornados, hurricanes, storms, and increasing sea levels. Droughts are also becoming much more prevalent and by the year 2040 it is projected that one in every four children will grow up in regions that have extreme water shortages. Displacement as an end to extreme weather events has increased exponentially in recent years, and with it comes an increase of turmoil and heartache experienced by the globe's most vulnerable populations. Another

impediment on the rights of children due to the climate crisis is the consequence of disease transmission. The fluctuations in temperature, precipitation, and humidity impact the survival of mosquitoes transmitting dangerous diseases, and roughly ninety percent of the burden from disease caused by climate change is bared by children under the age of five years old. Today, nearly 300 million adolescents across the globe breathe in toxic air on a daily basis, which has long-term impacts on their brain function, development, and overall bodily health. Throughout my college experience, the importance of environmental justice has been stressed and the discussion of environmental justice should be taken much more seriously across society. The physical wellbeing of future generations are becoming more and more compromised as a result of the climate crisis.

Through my time at Appalachian State University and during my time as a Camp Counselor, I have enhanced my understanding of potent concerns surrounding the mental and emotional health of children with regard to the climate crisis. The psychological effects of climatic events are equally devastating in relation to physical effects from climatic events. Such mental impacts include, but are not limited to, the substantial rise in posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, cognitive deficits, and issues surrounding learning abilities. In the article entitled “Responding to the Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Children and Youth” authors Sanson, Van Hoorn, and Burke explain that “after the 2010 floods in Pakistan, 73% of 10- to 19-year-olds displayed high levels of PTSD, with displaced girls affected most seriously.” Adolescent reactions in relation to extreme weather events incorporate a sense of loss with regard to identity; feelings of distress, grief, anger, helplessness; and increased suicide rates as well as increased aggression and violence. Growing up today looks different within each region of the globe. Maneuvering through adolescence has become more

difficult mentally on a grand scale in accordance with the increased intensity of the climate crisis.

Moving through childhood during this era has posed a serious threat to adolescents health, wellbeing, and rights. Having worked in childcare previously, it concerns me to think about this generation (and future generations) of youth and the influence that climate change has upon their livelihoods. Each human is entitled to their own specialized relationship with the earth. The alterations and hindrances in which the climate crisis has influenced human relationships with the earth both mentally and physically are unjust. From the decrease in safety of being outside regarding air quality and heat, to the displacement of various populations as a result of climate change, human interaction and connection with the planet on which we inhabit has become drastically different.

### **Anxieties that Accompany Having Children in the Midst of the Climate Crisis**

Throughout my life, my feelings regarding having children have been changed significantly due to the global climate crisis. Ever since I was a child, I thought that my future would resemble something similar to my own mother's: a big family full of togetherness and joy. However, now it pains me so much to think that there is potential for handing my own hypothetical children a world that will be utterly riddled with conflict and disasters. It is common for people to have fears connected to wanting to have children, already having children of your own, and being afraid to bring another human into this climate mess. Washington Post journalist, Caitlin Gibson, wrote an eye opening piece entitled "How Climate Experts Think About Raising Children Who Will Inherit a Planet in Crisis" through which she conveys the thoughts and feelings of several climate activist parents. Jedediah Britton-Purdy, a professor of environmental law at Columbia University, discusses the experience of showing his five month old, James, a

warm day that occurred in the dead of winter. Britton-Purdy displays the excitement and discontent that comes with showing his newborn son his first beautiful days that are the result of so much damage from human activity and greenhouse gas emissions. Injustice has plagued the world through extractive economies and capitalist ventures which express excessive consumerism and underlying colonial ideologies.

Looking beyond fear we can find hope, we must reject the thought of forsaking parenthood due to the climate crisis. In order to save humanity we can not abandon it entirely, messages of abandonment pose harm to the children who are already here on this earth. Being a parent means taking on roles pertaining to guidance and guardianship. It is conflicting to take up space in a world that is deteriorating while also having a child that is growing up. Parents play a crucial role in aiding their offspring by helping them to comprehend the present as well as envision a future consisting of hope, community, and resiliency. This large job can be intimidating and rewarding for not only a single person but for humanity at large. Parenting that embraces sustainability and justice can aid in changing localized and globalized understanding of community and existence.

### **Solace and Advice: Parenting and the Climate Crisis**

In terms of observing aspects of the world that have gone away due to degradation or extinction, it is important to teach the presence of beauty, change, and loss that have coexisted since time began. The earth lives in terms of dynamism, and acknowledging this allows for an honest understanding of the earth as it truly exists. Former regional Environmental Protection Agency Administrator and national field director for the organization Moms Clean Air Force, Heather McTeer Toney, explains that “parents must help their children imagine a future that is happy and safe... but to do that, they must first process their own sense of fear and loss.” If

parents are unable to resolve and create sense from their emotions and derive action, urgency, and meaning from these emotions then they will pass down their personal anxieties toward the climate crisis onto their children. As an environmental justice activist and a mother, McTeer Toney desires to instill the perseverance and perspectives exhibited by her Black ancestors in her three year old son and fourteen year old daughter. McTeer Toney expresses that in tackling the climate crisis, there is need in upholding and understanding the wisdom and adaptability her ancestors were forced to utilize. Having survived “traumatic change is part of our lived experience and, therefore, not new to our bloodline” she states, referring to the “complete upheaval and confusion enslaved Africans experienced” as well as the skills her ancestors applied to a land completely foreign to them. Here, McTeer Toney highlights the immense value of Black voices within the climate movement, regarding their perspectives and lineages of perseverance.

*“We know change. If our ancestors could figure out how to survive the hot underbelly of a ship, we can figure out how to handle the climate crisis, too.” - Heather McTeer Toney*

There is no option aside from figuring out how humanity is going to adapt and live on. The climate crisis is not new to us, and for the sake of every human’s future, change must happen through empathic analyses and strength. Kate Marvel, a climate scientist working for NASA and Columbia University projecting future possible situations in relation to the climate crisis, shows that the work she has completed taught her that what matters most is what we do in the current moment. Marvel explains that “the urgency of that edict leaves no room, no time for despondence,” and rather than soaking in despair by continuously looking forward, parents and

future parents need to look at the present and help their children form images of the future that convey safety, hope, equity, and respect for the planet and all of its inhabitants. Cultivating joy in a mindful way, expressing love, empathy, and gratefulness for each day as they come, and maintaining a state of present attention are excellent ways for parents to help their children uphold a healthy relationship with their understanding of the world surrounding them.

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