



What SA Kids Have Told Us About Climate Change

Commissioner for
Children & Young People
October 2021

Having clean air, water and food is crucial for children and young people to ensure they can reach developmental goals. They know that the cleaner and healthier the environment is, the healthier and more productive people are. They want urgent action on climate change with more focus on renewable energy and the elimination of fossil fuel dependency.

“ Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.” – UNFCCC Paris Agreement, 2015

Whilst the inclusion of children’s rights in the preamble of the Paris Agreement is welcome, this statement is not enough to ensure that progress towards a child rights-based approach to climate action is more broadly adopted.

Australia’s current climate policy does not take on a “child-lens” or consider child rights issues and the impacts of climate change on children’s rights now and in the future. These elements are totally overlooked. Yet it is children and young people who will face the consequences of the climate crisis and water insecurity, despite being those who are least responsible for it.

Under Article 24 of the UNCRC, children have the right to good quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment to stay healthy. Yet children and young people have said they are worried about pollution and plastics, and about the impact these pollutants are having on the environment and on their own health.



Photo by Markus Spiske

Children’s rights must be integrated into climate action, ensuring that climate projects respect, protect, promote, and fulfil children’s rights, rather than undermine them.

- “ Push for a sustainable future to help slow the effects of climate change. Push for recycling. More gardens & parks in our city. Reach a zero emissions target.” – 17 year old
- “ Make the switch to renewable energy to stop destroying the environment.” – 17 year old

Children and young people view the world differently to previous generations and have different expectations of leadership. For some time now, children and young people have been vocalising their increasing concern about growing inequality, fragmenting societies, and the impact of climate change, particularly on vulnerable populations around the world. In the 21st century these concerns are emerging as key issues affecting intergenerational trust, particularly when governments and leaders dismiss children and young people’s concerns, and take limited or no action to address the issues they see as critical.

They want leaders to listen to them and to consider their ideas. They want a future where their contributions are validated and where the value of their perspectives and the lived experience they bring is reflected in the policies and actions devised. They want their interests, expectations, and ideas to be embraced, and their emerging capacity for leadership to be nurtured.

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As citizens, children have a right to inform the development, design, and implementation of legislation, policies, programs, and services that have a direct or indirect impact on them now, and in the future. Children are asking adults to give them more of a voice and to be taken seriously. They want adults to take a sharper focus on their rights, interests, and wellbeing, and to integrate these into environmental policy.

However, there are few mechanisms to support children and young people's participation in decision-making. This not only undermines their trust and confidence in adult leaders and institutions now; but also on the likelihood of being able to fulfil their hopes and dreams in the future.

Key to children's interest in the environment is their sense of justice. They recognise that poorer people, remote communities, and indigenous people will be those who are most affected by climate change. Conversely, they see that they might also benefit most from the development and introduction of renewable energy technology, reducing and eventually eliminating our need for fossil fuel.

Children are growing up in a time that has been described by scientists as being a global 'climate emergency' and 'climate disaster'. Regardless of where they live, children and young people are regularly exposed to the reality of climate change, either through their lived experience or through various media channels. They read news stories and reports about it every day. They see images and video footage of extreme weather events, air pollution, rising sea levels, and loss of biodiversity occurring in places across the globe.

"If I were the boss of South Australia, I would... actually do something about the environment instead of lying and putting pressure on my generation." – 12 year old

Closer to home children across South Australia are being exposed to emergency events and disasters at much greater rates than the generations who came before them. They know that disasters are becoming more likely with rising temperatures. They expect there to be more heatwaves that will inevitably lead to more droughts and longer bush fire seasons with longer winters and shorter more intense summers featuring more days of extreme weather risk.

These disasters have significant effect on their physical and mental health and wellbeing, and have been declared by the UNCRC as a major child rights issue. South Australian primary aged children worry about the environment more than anything else. Hundreds of children have said climate change, pollution, the ocean, waste, plastics, drought, deforestation, and bushfires make them feel uncertain about the future and contribute to a feeling of hopelessness.

In response to the mountain of scientific evidence highlighting the critical need for urgent climate action, many children and young people feel despair and frustration at what they see is a lack of action to protect the environment and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Although evidence indicates that some of the significant effects of climate change can be mitigated or reversed with policy redirection and reinvestment, this message, and information about what positive action is already being taken to progress climate action, rarely reaches young people.



Photo by Vince Fleming

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What they currently understand is that we are on the brink of a disaster that will impact on the people, places, and animals they care about and that it's not something happening in far off locations but right on their back doorstep. There is a sense of fear among young people that adults and leaders are leaving it 'too late' to do anything about climate change, and that it has been left to them to bear the brunt of adult inaction and have to 'clean up' the mess left by previous generations of climate change deniers.

“ At this rate, our job in the future will be to live with the impact that past generations have left on our Earth. The government needs to address things such as climate change and realise that it isn't science fiction – it's real life and if we don't do anything about it soon, it will be too late.” – 12 year old

Children say they care very strongly about the environment and that spending time playing outside in nature and with animals is very important to them. They recognise the benefit of green spaces and of building liveable cities. They want access to natural spaces for play and wellbeing, and they want to be involved in community effort focused on protecting these places and spaces for future generations.

Children in South Australia see the degradation of the environment as a huge threat to their future. Many children in regional South Australia are concerned about drought, with many fearing for farmers and their livelihoods, or that the Murray River will run out of water and that there won't be enough to sustain the needs of the state. They are also concerned about bushfires affecting people and animals in their region.

“Not many people listen to us and climate change will be worse for us.” – 12 year old

Children have identified many ways that we can all take better care of the environment and help to address environmental issues.

Their ideas include the following:

- plant more trees
- invest in renewable resources
- manufacture more electric vehicles
- make more non-plastic alternatives
- recycle soft plastic; and
- introduce different recycling systems at school and at home.

Children and young people have said they want to:

- 1. engage on issues they care about**
- 2. express their personal values through the community issues they engage with**
- 3. have the opportunity to use their voice and be heard**
- 4. be supported to achieve; and**
- 5. make an impact now and in the future.**



Photo by Andrew Lancaster

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Children want adults to:

1. Provide children with climate education and green skills, essential for empowering children to protect themselves from climate related threats, and adaptation to and preparation for the effects of climate change.

“ [We need] ...education on how to be environmentally friendly. Without a healthy and clean environment, future generations will not be able to live life to the fullest.” – 14 year old

2. Uphold children's right to be heard and create mechanisms for consultation with children and young people, and include young people in climate-related decision making.

“ The government needs to consider our future, they need to start making positive impacts on the environment, because at this rate, our job in the future will be to live with the impact that past generations have left on our Earth. The government needs to address (address) things such as climate change and realise this isn't science fiction, its real life & if we don't do anything about it soon, it will be too late.” – 17 year old

3. Invest in the capacity of future generations to address and respond to the climate crisis through investment in green, low-carbon initiatives.

“ I want coal industries to be replaced by renewables so children, especially the poor are not affected by future climate change, so indigenous children can remain on country as the most affected by these industries will be the least privileged (privileged) so its vital.” – 18 year old

“ Reinstate carbon tax, restriction on the carbon emissions, restriction on cutting trees + growing trees projects.” – 15 year old

“ SA looks very nice now I would like it to stay like that for future. This is very important because when I was little I used to always go to the hills with my family on walks and bike rides. I want others to have the same opportunities as me.” – 16 year old

“ Nature and fresh air – I've always liked going outside, [to] parks, [the] beach, being around everything that's natural and not man made and made of concrete. I like being around the colours. Everything is so bright, everything feels so fresh in your imagination but in real life... it makes me feel like I'm escaping from everything in that moment. Nothing else bothers me. Nothing from the past. It's just the sun and the plants.” – 17 year old

“ I don't like that all the rubbish (rubbish) can pollute (pollute) all the waters in the world.” – 9 year old

“ Renewable energy – if our population grows, we may lose liveability – we need to plan for our future.” – 16 year old

“ More natural playgrounds. Move plants, small waterfalls/lakes, grassed areas, plant names – It would be good to have natural playgrounds because kids would use their imaginations more as well as learning about the wildlife that lives on earth.” – 16 year old

“ Education on how to be environmentally friendly, without a healthy & clean environment future generations will not be able to live life to the fullest.” – 18 year old

“ The climate – I care about having a safe climate because I want communities to be safe from extreme weather events.” – 19 year old