

# Children & Youth Mental Health In Our Changing Climate A Guide for Faith Leaders

## Overview

As the backbone of our local communities, congregations are on the frontlines of care. And, as our changing climate causes more frequent and severe weather events, the physical and mental health impacts are following, weighing heavily on communities and congregations. Faith leaders are increasingly needing to provide mental health services to families and children. Research by the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica on mental health and climate change highlights the profound impacts of climate change on human well-being, particularly children. The research indicates that children and youth are uniquely vulnerable groups, with impacts ranging from direct trauma from severe weather events to anxiety about longer-term changes. Children in Black and Latino communities are even more vulnerable. Children's mental health may not just be affected by their own experiences of stressors but also by vicarious experiences of their caregivers (Simpson et al., 2011). Congregations and faith leaders are called by our faith to support children's mental health and climate solutions. ecoAmerica's research shows there are several effective ways that adults can help, highlighted below.

## Background

The youth mental health crisis in the US has been increasing at an alarming rate for over a decade, characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts and actions. Racism, discrimination, poverty, housing insecurity, social media, gun violence, effects from COVID-19 uncertainty, and more are impacting the mental health of children and youth, and climate change intersects with and compounds these problems.

Pollution, extreme weather, higher temperatures, and physical/emotional trauma can affect children's development before birth and may accumulate significant mental health impacts as a child ages. Also, children experience the harms of climate impacts through their caregivers, who are physically and mentally impacted. PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other poor mental health outcomes are all linked to disaster events (Clayton et al., 2023). In addition, the perceived failure of governments to take action on climate change is associated with distress among young people (Hickman et al., 2021). For more information by age, view the [report](#).

**Solutions:** *Faith communities and clergy can and should support the mental health of children and youth, and their caregivers. Early detection of anxiety, depression, and PTSD is important*

*and should result in referrals to licensed mental health providers and physicians. Incorporate the following actions in age-appropriate ways to foster the mental wellbeing of children and youth in your community.*

**Talk about climate change honestly** acknowledging the problem. Read age-appropriate books, show age-appropriate videos, preach, teach, host guest speakers, and offer educational engagement opportunities. Provide time to process and discuss the content with the children and youth afterward.

**Involve children/youth authentically in congregational and community climate action.** Being part of collective action is good for all our spirits. Work to reduce emissions, increase biodiversity, advocate for climate solutions, and vote to ensure our local and national leaders bring about solutions that create a better tomorrow for our children.

**Provide regular opportunities to be outside.** Foster healthy relationships with one another, nature, and the Divine through activities such as outdoor worship, prayer or labyrinth walks, gardening, playing, hiking, canoeing, retreats, camping, and more. Spending regular time in nature reduces anxiety and stress and connects us with the Holy.

**Encourage children and youth to share,** validating their feelings. It is important that adult leaders listen, repeat back what is heard and acknowledge all feelings as logical in these times. They need to hear that what they are experiencing is normal.

**Teach and model healthy coping skills** for stress and anxiety. Demonstrate and discuss the importance of exercise like playing tag, climbing trees, taking walks, breathing deeply, counting to 10, talking with a trusted friend, spending time with a pet, and getting outside regularly to help with stress. Encourage play, imagination, curiosity, and wonder.

**Regularly share stories of hopeful action** globally, nationally, and in your local community. Bad climate news is everywhere, provide balance by sharing the good news.

**Learn with and from children/youth on climate solutions.** Clean energy, electric vehicles, reforestation and growing green urban spaces are making a difference.

Read **Mental Health and Our Changing Climate, Children and Youth** for more information and resources.

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