The nexus between mental health and climate change for children and youth

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Climate change impacts across developmental systems (simplified and incomplete)

Macrosystem:
- Extreme temperatures, rising sea levels, unpredictable seasons
- Extreme weather events: floods, droughts, fires, hurricanes.....
- Biodiversity collapse

Exosystem:
- Resource scarcity (land, food, water); air pollution
- Mass migration; increase in infectious diseases
- Intergroup & interstate conflict, economic disruption
- Destroyed infrastructure
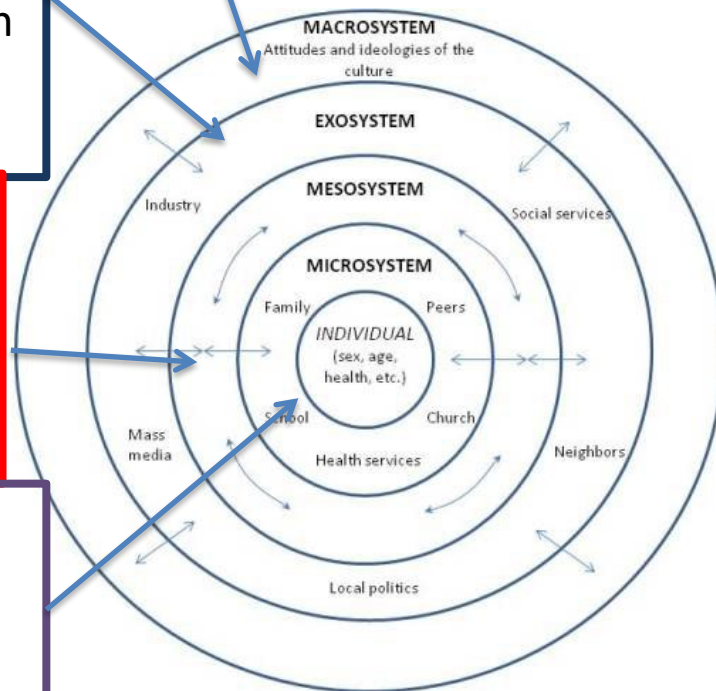- Overwhelmed services (education, health, social)

Mesosystem:
- Family/community violence
- Loss of housing, adequate food and water
- Disrupted schooling; child labour
- Forced relocation or evacuation

Microsystem:
- Disruption of caregiving system, family stress
- Disrupted routines; loss of social/peer support
- Traumatic experiences, cumulative stress

Adapted from: Sanson, Malca, Van Hoorn & Burke (2022) **Children and climate change**. Cambridge Elements in Child Development.

MACROSYSTEM
Attitudes and ideologies of the culture

EXOSYSTEM

MESOSYSTEM

MICROSYSTEM

Industry

Social services

Family

Peers

INDIVIDUAL
(sex, age, health, etc.)

School

Church

Mass media
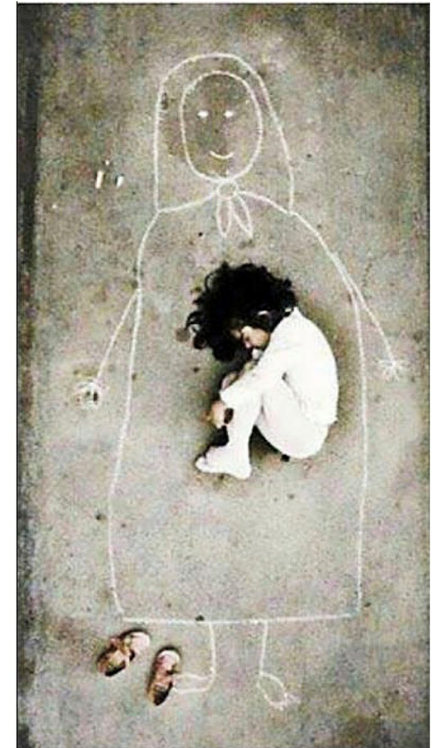
Health services

Neighbors

Local politics

Children are disproportionately at risk from climate change

Because of:

- stage of rapid development
- smaller body weight
- immature organs, nervous and immune systems
- more rapid metabolism
- behavioural characteristics
- limited experience
- developing cognition
- **dependency on adults**
- **accumulation of stresses over their lifetimes**

World Health Organisation (2011) - children will bear

- 88% of the burden of disease
- 30-50% of disaster fatalities

The climate crisis is a child rights crisis

Introducing
THE CHILDREN'S CLIMATE RISK INDEX

unicef
for every child 75

… already having a devastating impact on the well-being of children globally (UNICEF, 2021)

- Almost every child on earth is exposed to at least one climate and environmental hazard, shock or stress… But **850 million – approximately one-third of all children – are exposed to four or more stresses**, creating incredibly challenging environments for children to live, play and thrive.

- Globally, approximately **1 billion children** – nearly half of the world's children – **live in countries that are at an 'extremely high-risk'** from the impacts of climate change.

Direct impacts of exposure to climate change events on children and youth

(1) Physical health

- Deaths and injuries

- Infectious air-, food-, and water-borne

  diseases and heat-related illnesses

- Malnutrition, diarrheal diseases, etc

(2) Psychological/mental health

- Post traumatic stress disorder/symptoms

- Depression and anxiety

- Sleep problems

- Cognitive and learning problems

- Sense of helplessness, hopelessness

Severity of symptoms depends on nature of exposure

Resilience – and its limits

➤ Most children show resiliency and recovery after single disasters:

• Supported by early reunion with parents, stable sensitive caregiving, quick return to routines (e.g. child friendly spaces, schools), social support (etc.)

➤ But vulnerability increases if exposure is *severe*, *prolonged* or *repeated*:

• System breakdown (family, community, health, education)

• Re-traumatisation (not habituation)

➤ *This is the likely scenario for many children*

'Indirect' or 'vicarious' impacts of climate change

Awareness of climate change leads to:

- Fear, anxiety, worry

- Distress, grief, sense of loss

- Anger and frustration

- Helplessness, despair and hopelessness

Hickman et al. (Lancet, 2021):

- 10,000 16-25 year olds across 10 countries

- 60% "very" or "extremely" worried

- 58% felt betrayed by government's inaction
  58% felt humanity is doomed

- "The psychological (emotional, cognitive, social, and functional) burdens of climate change are profoundly affecting huge numbers of young people around the world"

An unprecedented situation for today's adults with responsibilities for the next generation - nurturing children in the face of a potentially catastrophic future

What can we do to support young people?

1. Listen and respond to their feelings, concerns
- Create times and places for them to share their feelings
- Listen closely, don't judge or dismiss
- Recognise their feelings as valid (share your own?)

-- **but pair** with messages of *realistic hope* and *efficacy* (more soon)

2. Build their understanding

Shielding children from the truth is not possible -- nor fair
- Our responsibility is to help them cope with knowing
- Respond to their questions honestly (but taking their age into account)
- Correct misunderstandings
- **Build knowledge** - about impacts, but also *causes* and *solutions*

What can we do to support young people?

3. Build 'realistic/active hope'

It's a huge and urgent problem, but:

- We know what needs to be done; new approaches being developed all the time

- Lots of good people are working on it

- We've solved big problems before

- 'People power' works – efficacy

4. Build their capacity to take action

The best antidote to anxiety is action!!

- Be a good role model, explain your reasons
- Treat kids not just as victims, but as problem-solvers with a right to be involved
- Treat kids not only as consumers, but also as citizens – build active citizenship skills
- Show how working with others is fun, educational, and effective

Unless we act now

unite for children

The impact of climate change on children

unicef

Agency: the capacity to contribute meaningfully

Listen to and act on children's perspectives on climate change, and involve them in action

Developing the skills and having opportunities to actively contribute to combating climate change can provide important psychological protection, helping young people to feel more in control, more hopeful and more resilient. Hart, Fisher, & Kimiagar, 2014

Should we support young people taking action?
What the kids say

"[Taking action] creates a sense of solidarity, of cooperation and productivity in the face of despair.
I've learnt how to … talk to authority figures, recognise my rights, speak confidently in public … communicate non violently and how to work effectively in a … collective." (Alice)

"Taking action on climate change can be incredibly rewarding and fulfilling and has certainly built many of my skills up." (Emma)

If we recognise the climate crisis as an *unprecedented* and *existential* threat:

- **can we continue with Business As Usual?**

- **should we incorporate it into all our work?**

- **should we act as citizens**
  - raise our voices to protect the next generation(s)?
  - demand global action at emergency speed and scale?