



# How to talk to children about climate change: Intergenerational engagement

The importance of secure attachment relationships with adults, is a well-known factor affecting resilience and coping skills for children and young people. Young people need supportive, stable adults to help them weather difficult times.

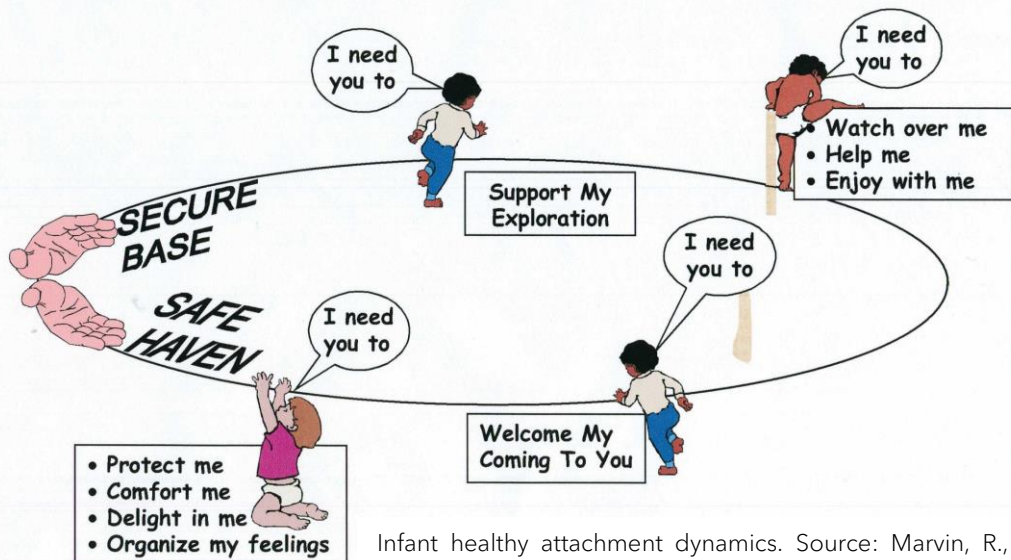


But what is sometimes forgotten is the role that strong attachments play in the development of **problem-solving skills** and **interpersonal skills** (including with teachers).

Intergenerational attachments are therefore needed to develop educated citizens who can take smart decisions and work together under difficult circumstances - in other words, it's important for a functioning and stable society.



## Circle of Security Parent Attending to the Child's Needs



## Compromised attachments

Even before climate concerns gained prominence, we've seen the consequences of unstable attachments in society. Arguably, the Western move from tribal societies to a nuclear, more isolated family unit, mean that more young people lack a reliable adult attachment figure, particularly when adverse childhood experiences are at play. Young people missing the guidance and support of a secure adult and instead turn to bond with peers (often online), this can lead to an excessive focus on 'fitting-in' (Neufeld & Maté).



Peer-attached youth can become more vulnerable to exploitation and risky behaviour.

Additionally, peer altercations and rejection harm can mental health and increase the risk of suicide (e.g. Cheek et al., 2020).



## Intergenerational risks

For many young people, there is a feeling that the 'problem' of climate change has been passed onto young people, while the wealthier older generation reaped the benefits of the economic boom afforded by the plentiful supply of fossil fuels (United Nations development programme, 2019).

The majority of 16-25 year-olds in the UK and globally (Hickman et al., 2021) now report feelings of mistrust, being disregarded, betrayed, and let down over climate change by those that are supposed to safeguard them - elders in power.



A failure to limit global warming therefore amounts to a betrayal of the attachment agreements between young people and the 'elders'- at mass scale.

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## Where is the 'secure base'?

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Furthermore, the impacts of climate change including: bereavements, food scarcity, property loss, and increased aggression, represent a potential rise in adverse childhood experiences, which further compromise secure intergenerational attachments.

*"We must look upon the decisions we take today through the eyes of future generations and allow our actions to be guided by the concept of intergenerational equity"*

*The Mary Robinson Foundation Climate Justice (2017)*





## THE (ANTI)-NATALIST DEBATE



Once an attempt to reduce human carbon footprints, people are increasingly choosing not to have children in order to spare their progeny the suffering from future climate impacts.



This raises the question of the future care burden of an aging population, not just for countries like Japan. Is it reasonable to expect young people to pay for care of large elderly population, when these 'elders' haven't cared for the planet for young people?

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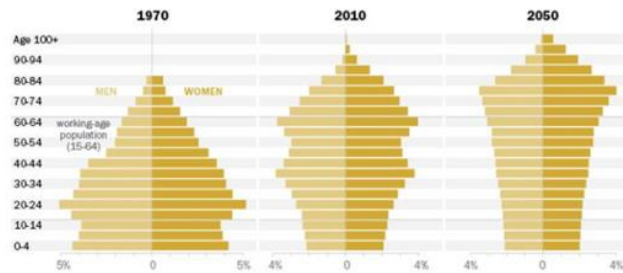
THE MOVEMENT TO NOT HAVE CHILDREN OWING TO FEARS OVER CLIMATE CHANGE IS GROWING AND IMPACTING FERTILITY RATES QUICKER THAN ANY PRECEDING TREND IN THE FIELD OF FERTILITY DECLINE

MORGAN STANLEY ANALYSTS  
CITED IN THE WASHINGTON POST (OSAKA, S., 2022)



### Japan's Aging Population

Percentage of the population by age and sex



Note: For 1970 data, the 80-84 age group shows all 80+.  
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
PEW RESEARCH CENTER



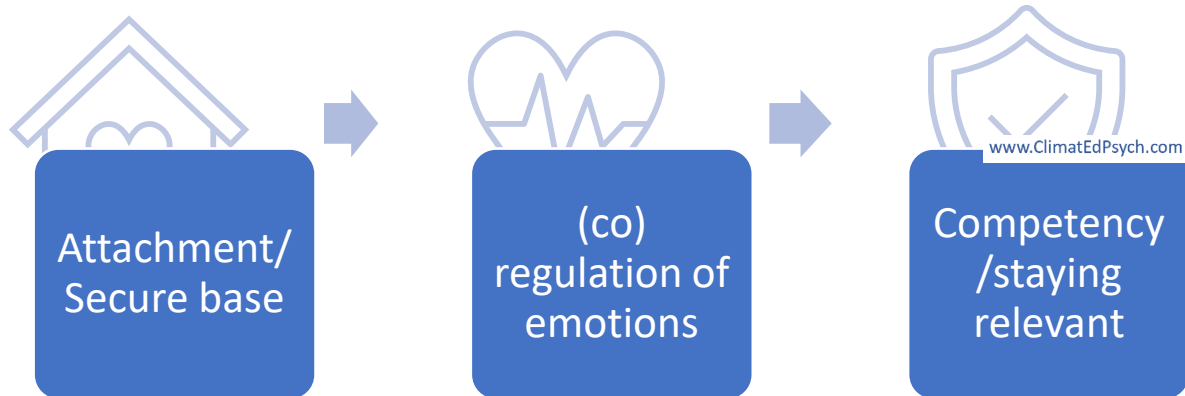
In the face of climate crisis, we must redouble our efforts to nurture and sustain strong intergenerational bonds.

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# Restoring and maintaining intergenerational attachments



The broader 'ARC' framework for trauma re integration, ('attachment, regulation, and competency' Arvidson et al., 2011), provides a helpful framework to consider ways to try to repair and restore our attachments when climate concerns threaten intergenerational relationships.

## 1. Attachment: restoring the physical and relational 'secure base'

The primary need of physical **safety** is threatened by climate impacts and must be addressed for young people to feel securely attached to those caring for them.

Children and young people need responsible adults, taking action on climate mitigation and adaptation.

They also need relational safety - that is the ability to express their emotions, without the adult themselves becoming overwhelmed or judgemental. Think: unconditional positive regard.



Dr Louise Edgington

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## INSTEAD OF:

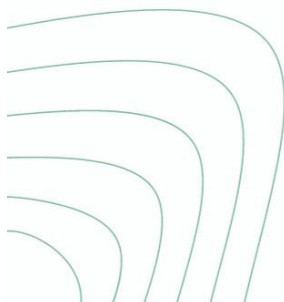


**"YOUR GENERATION WILL SAVE THE PLANET"**

## TRY THIS:



**"WE ARE ALL WORKING TOGETHER TO ADAPT AND  
MAKE SUSTAINABLE CHANGES"**



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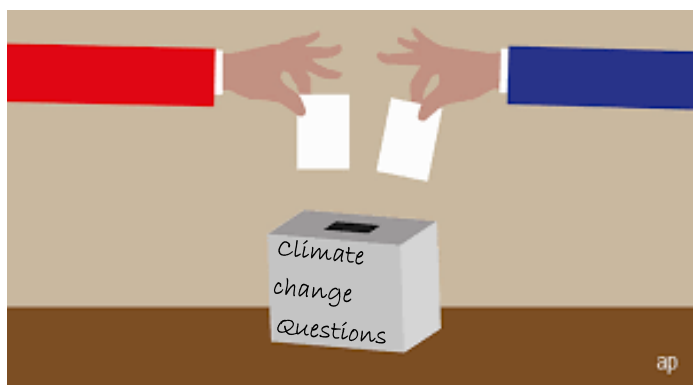
# 1. Secure base - Recommendations

## Physical Security:

- Protection - tell or involve children and young people in your carbon reduction efforts and activism. Attending a protest or march helps children seeing how many adults are working to protect their future.
- Take realistic measures to combat direct climate impacts in your area e.g. installing blinds for heat waves, checking trees for sign of disease and storm vulnerability, install flood defences.
- Schools may wish to consider implementing online learning systems as a back up for inclement weather or consider a flash flood/ wildfire smoke 'drill'.
- Share climate event plans with children, so they can be confident that they will be ok in the event of difficulty.

## Relational security:

- Work on your own climate emotions to be able to 'hold space' for children and young people - so you don't get overwhelmed too.
- Stay engaged in the topic and aware of any tendency to slip into avoidance or denial of the urgency climate action, seeming to be disengaged can be quite upsetting for children.
- Invite and make time for conversations about climate change. Be sure to return to the conversation later if they raise a question when you're busy.
- Ask children what they know and engage in a fact finding mission together if there is something you're not sure of.
- You might want to build a conversation around something that's on the news or raised in their school or media feeds.
- Schools may wish to set up a 'climate questions box' or regular 'climate cafes' for young people to share feelings. more details: [info@climatedpsych.com](mailto:info@climatedpsych.com).





## 2. (co) Regulation of emotions: holding space for feelings

The oxygen mask principal states that we need to help ourselves before we can be a help to others. So, as well as being able to listen calmly to climate concerns from young people (secure base), it would be really helpful for adults have their own emotional regulation practices that they can share and model for children and young people.

This would hold for any crisis but the inherent injustice of climate change requires adults to go a step further. The young and old are not 'in the same boat' and this needs acknowledging.

Even better, adults who are able to assume responsibility and apologise for their part in climate change have a chance of meaningful reconciliation with the young people they care about.



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I'm sorry .  
Please forgive me  
Thank you  
I love you .

Ho'Oponopono - Traditional Hawaiian practice for reconciliation





As well as the coping strategies for eco emotions, adults can 'attune' to a young person's emotional needs and help with regulation through an approach known as Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al. 1996).

### What Emotion Coaching means in practice

(how co-regulation works)

Step 1: **Recognising, empathising, soothing to calm** ('I understand how you feel, you're not alone')

Step 2: **Validating the feelings and labelling** ('This is what is happening, this is what you're feeling')

Step 3 (if needed): **Setting limits on behaviour** ('We can't always get we want')

Step 4: **Problem-solving with the child/young person** ('We can sort this out')

The idea is to communicate unconditional positive regard and acceptance of all feelings. Then to help the children understand and label the feeling, before working together in a constructive way.

eco-emotion coaching examples

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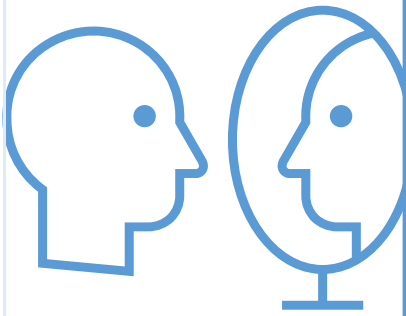
*"I understand why you're angry, I feel angry too. It's ok to feel angry. Trouble is that it's not ok to hurt other people. Instead, we can use anger to take action. Shall we write to the Head teacher? post something online? What do you think?"*

*"I wonder if that news headline is making you feel anxious? It's normal to feel worried when we don't know what's going to happen. You're still allowed to enjoy your life and have fun though... what could we do differently as a family/school that would help?"*

*"I can see you seem really down about the loss of wildlife. Is it maybe a sadness or grief for over something you care about? You have a beautiful heart and it's ok to cry...Are there other animals species that you think need protecting?"*



## 2. (co) Regulation Recommendations



### Emotional attunement:

- Apply the principles of emotion coaching in interactions with children and young people. Pay attention to young people's behaviour as disruptive behaviour is often a cover for anxiety or sadness.
- Pay attention to your own responses to 'big' feelings e.g. does a young person's anger make you feel defensive?
- Acknowledge the generational injustice of climate impacts, and take responsibility for your part. If you can, apologise.

### Emotional regulation :

- Share and model your own eco-emotion coping strategies and help children find what works for them.
- Have calming exercises and time in nature as part of your regular routine with children, so that they know what to do in the moment.
- Be mindful that those children who have insecure attachments, experienced previous trauma or adverse childhood experiences may become distressed more easily. Check in with them more often.





## 3. Competency: Staying relevant

It may be tempting to protect children from knowledge of climate change; we instinctively want to protect children from distress, especially when we are worried and upset ourselves.

However, given the widespread media coverage, this is not only impossible, but also unfair, as children and young people have the right to know about threats to their lives, to have a voice and be involved in protecting themselves.



The climate psychologist Caroline Hickman (2019) uses the analogy of a seedling compost requiring 'just enough grit to grow'. Without some hard truths, children will have weak roots and not thrive in the real world. Too much too early and they will not be able to grow roots in the first place.



Young people need help to discern the truth in bite-sized chunks, delivered sensitively and age-appropriately. We need to use psychology to shift our perspective and reimagine new systems for the solutions to climate change.



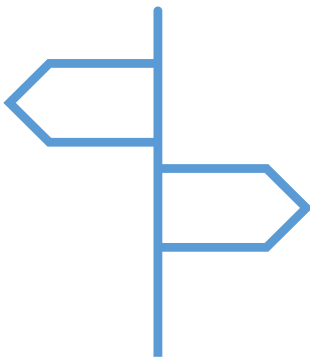


But how do adults stay relevant and helpful to children and young people when the pace of change is so fast? The interaction of climate change, advances in biotechnology and artificial intelligence (AI) make it impossible to know what the future will look like. Covid-19 has already shown us just how much things can change with unpredictable events.

To help children become competent adults in an uncertain future, it is argued here that we need to acknowledge that uncertainty, fast paced change and the effects of unpredictable, destabilising events is the 'new normal'.

Children and young people take cues from adults and model what they see and hear around them. We need to stay humble, admit we don't always know best, becoming adaptable and 'ok' with change, so that young people will be too.

### 3. Staying relevant - Recommendations



#### Climate truth and solutions:

- Do not give false hope or avoid the topic of climate change, but deliver facts in age-appropriate, bitesized chunks.
- The psychology, social change, economic and political aspects of climate should be taught alongside the science. Encourage young people to 'think outside the box'. (the box being the systems).
- Teach the skills of weighing up evidence and the pitfalls of trusting information online.
- For every difficult fact, try and present 2/3 climate solutions.

#### Future skills and uncertainty:

- Normalise the uncertainty of life. If this is hard for you, try a day out or even a lesson without making plans and talk about trusting yourself / the children to handle what comes up. Notice the feelings it provokes. Can you still have a nice day?
- Aim to model being comfortable with change. Ask young people to share a time that something changed for them, how they felt and how they coped. Read 'Who moved my cheese?' (Johnson, 2015)
- Stay humble, recognising that adults may not 'know best'. Respect and encourage children's attempts to explore and empower themselves.
- Teaching anti-agist thinking may help with intergenerational collaboration. Refer to activists such as David Attenborough, Jane Fonda and Mary Robinson.







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