

# Eco-Anxiety in Children

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## Opinion

In recent years, the media has been talking about eco-anxiety or climate anxiety. Although this topic has been studied since about 2007, a 2017 report published by the American Psychological Association (APA) in collaboration with Eco America, entitled *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate* [1], sparked a much deeper discussion by defining eco-anxiety as a large-scale reaction to the state of planetary ecosystems and more specifically as a chronic (constant and intense) fear of environmental catastrophe. Thus, we can distinguish eco-anxiety, which would concern any anxiety related to the ecological crisis, and climate anxiety which would be more related to anthropogenic climate change [2].

We have known for several years that adverse events related to climate change (weather changes, natural disasters etc...) cause health problems such as sleep disorders, stress, anxiety, depression and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation [3]. However, a less studied aspect is related to the mental and emotional consequences caused by the awareness of these slow and gradual environmental changes [4]. The mental health impacts of climate change and other environmental crises are estimated to be very significant, with panic attacks, insomnia, obsessive thoughts, and/or appetite changes based on subjects' self-reported manifestations [5-8]. Similarly, over the past 10 years, many people reported that eco-anxiety was a primary reason for their reluctance to have children [9-12]. This type of anxiety can thus be considered a public health issue.

To date, relatively few studies have targeted children and adolescents. However, a large-scale online study by Hickman et al. [13] of 10,000 16- to 25-year-olds from Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States (1,000 participants per country) collected young people's thoughts and feelings about climate change and government responses to climate change. Overall, the results support moderate to high levels of concern among all subjects. Over 45% of youth reported that their feelings about climate change negatively impacted their daily lives and functioning. Government responses to climate change were perceived as insufficient and inadequate. Young people under the age of 16 are the "forgotten ones". The scientific literature on the subject suggests that children under a certain age are not aware of adverse events related to climate change and that these events do not affect their behavior and mental health. However, many testimonies from children, parents and health professionals support the contrary. In the near future, it seems necessary to study the level of eco-anxiety of children from the earliest age (e.g., 3 years old, when language begins to set in) until the end of adolescence in order to propose concrete avenues for transforming eco-paralysis (i.e., concern people who feel overwhelmed and unable to act, Albrecht [14]) into action. Among the methods proposed to foster engagement with climate change, games and gamification have been highlighted as capable of promoting deep connection and interaction with issues such as sustainable consumption. A first analysis of the recent literature highlights the existence of some studies that have developed gamified educational applications around environmental issues with the objective of improving children's perception, however, these works do not allow to evaluate

the level of anxiety generated by these ecological issues and indicate that the benefits of the use of these programs are short-lived (e.g., air pollution, Relvas, 2022; marine environment, Arboleya-García & Miralles, 2022; climate change, Fernández et al. [15]).

In conclusion and unfortunately, climate change is certainly the greatest challenge of our century since our children will suffer the consequences on all levels. Among the possible deleterious impacts, ecoanxiety has been identified in adolescents and adults, but it is clear that children have been ignored as if they did not have the emotional maturity to understand the climate issues. However, this is a reality. Children are just as concerned by this phenomenon as their parents [16]. It is necessary to address the issue of assessing this new type of anxiety in order to understand its extent and nature and to provide appropriate support.

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