

Presenter (Verity)

Hello, and welcome again to Climate Crisis Conversations - Catastrophe or Transformation. It's a podcast hosted by the Climate Psychology Alliance. And this is the place where as we live through this momentous age increasingly defined by climate chaos, we're talking about how we're feeling.

My name is Verity Sharp. I'm a radio broadcaster. And in this episode, I'm joined by climate psychologist Caroline Hickman, to tackle the question of how we talk to children about climate change.

This is a question that's close to my heart, not least because I'm a parent. But even if I wasn't, it is, of course, to all children that this very precarious future belongs. My son is 10, we talk about environmental issues quite a lot in our daily lives, we try and live as sustainably as we can. We're recycling, we're trying not to buy plastic, growing our own food. So the subject comes up a lot, but the true enormity of the situation doesn't come up. And I often wonder, how far is it appropriate to make him aware, at his age, exactly where we are in this narrative? So Caroline, hello, how do we talk to children about climate change?

Caroline

It's a huge question, isn't it? And you know, I think it's really important that we're starting with this question and with children - because they are going to be bearing a lot of emotional cost on behalf of humanity, about what we've failed to do up to this point, and should be helping us shape the direction of where we need to go now, and in the future. Barack Obama in 2015, said, 'our children in the future are going to be asking us to look back and ask, did we do all that we could to do what was necessary to deal with this?' And I think for myself, that's at the centre of - I keep asking myself on a weekly basis, especially when I'm scared or if I'm worried, or if I'm having to take on something that I don't feel competent at doing - I just say, 'Well, you know, this is all I should be doing.' This is motivating me to do more. Does that make sense?

Verity

Yeah. Do you have children yourself?

Caroline

I don't, I don't have birth children of my own. I have lots of children in my life. I have nieces, nephews, I have friends' children. There are lots of students. And as a psychotherapist, I've do a lot of work with children, who've been traumatised, and a lot of work with children and families. And previously as a social worker. So I don't have my own birth children. No. But I have a lot of sense of myself extending that care and mothering energy towards the loss of children, but also towards parents who are having to cope with this in thinking about their own children. So in that sense, I think I can bring something to the discussion. I've got lots of nurturing energy, but most of it gets directed to my adorable labradoodle, Murphy.

Verity

So as I say, I've got a 10 year old. Yes. It's interesting, isn't it? Because he is very aware, I think of this changing climate. But, you know, is it appropriate to be telling him some of the catastrophic, really scenarios that are being laid out?

Caroline

It's such a great question, it's a really important question. Before we get to that question- I understand that we need to get to some practical things, and we need to answer that question - but before we get there, can we think for a minute about who children are to us, who they represent, and the way that our society kind of conceptualises children in childhood? Because I think that will help us understand how we can get there. Because there is not going to be a single answer there.

It depends on the child is going to be the simple answer. So what we have to think about children before we can start thinking about how to talk to actual children, so it makes sense?

Verity
Yeah.

Caroline

So a lot of the time in Western society in particular, we construct children as innocence. So that's behind that sort of dilemma. And as parents, I see parents kind of sitting there, like yourself, thinking, 'How much should I tell him?', and feeling really, really responsible, as though that decision is yours alone?

So I want to move us towards thinking about how do we work with children to engage with this climate crisis to engage with the ecological crisis, that it's not just parents problem alone. Children themselves are taking action on this. And so I think we need to be working with them. We need to be talking with them. I don't want to put too much spin on it, but I do think this gives us a unique opportunity to join together with children in new ways and work alongside them. You know, I think at the very least, parents should be out there supporting their children on the school strikes, ideally wearing animal onesies, you know, and looking ridiculous.

We need to be supporting them in a range of ways to get their voices heard. Over history, we have a tendency to disbelieve children, to patronise children, to marginalise children. We know that their voice doesn't get legitimacy until they reach 18, and they get the vote. For example, if you look at some of the awful things that's being said about Greta Thunberg, you know, she's being patronised. She's been put down. There's been messages in the newspapers, 'Yes. Greta, I thought I knew everything when I was 16, as well.' They're all ways of dismissing the importance of her message. But they're deeply patronising and cruel put downs, and she's, thankfully, fairly sort of robust, I think, and secure. It may wound her, I don't know.

But that's ways we silence children. So when children speak out, they know that if they say something that adults, or the powerful world doesn't like, that's the reaction they'll get. So that will silence some children. And it will make children afraid of being belittled and humiliated. People can use shame to silence children.

So we have to kind of keep in mind that children in speaking out and then thinking about how we speak to children- children are very sensitive to this, they know that that's the sort of thing that they can invite as a social reaction from wider society.

Partly, I think, because adults themselves are pretty scared. They don't quite know the answers. I think adults and parents are often pretty embarrassed about the situation we're in. I think feeling probably a little guilty, ashamed, out of their depth. If your child comes to you and says, 'How do I deal with feeling anxious about my exams at school?' you've got something you can draw, you've got your own experience of being anxious about exams at school to help you think about how to help your child.

But I'm imagining as a parent, you're only just coming to terms with how to cope with your own feelings about the climate emergency and the ecological crisis. and I'm imagining that you're just starting to feel your own way forwards with that.. so to have your child then ask you how to cope with this is going to bring a whole mix of feelings for you, part of which will be your anxiety, but you can't say that your child, can you, because you've got to have a response that looks after your child?

Verity

I'm not getting the sense from our son anyway, that there is anxiety there, actually, because there's a sense that this is their reality. So you know, maybe as older people with a history of having spent many years living so comfortably and so unaware anxiety is coming in, in spades now, but actually, as a child, if you've only been on this planet for 10 years.. You know,

Caroline

..and some of that may be because he doesn't fully understand. Some of it may be because he sees things very clearly. And certainly the children that I've been doing the research with, they're not expressing anxiety to me. They're expressing anger, though, and the frustration. They're they've got other strong feelings around this. They want adults to do something about the situation they're in. They have this sense of powerlessness and frustration with adults. But no, you're absolutely right. They're not really talking about anxiety. Mostly anger. And I think some of the anger could get directed towards adults, increasingly soon, if we don't start to engage children in this, these discussions together.

Verity

We're already seeing kids, well, taking adults to court, aren't they in the states further the effects of climate change? Yeah. Yeah, this is fantastic. Yeah, which is gonna get interesting.

Caroline

It's gonna get interesting. And I mean, part of me says, good for them. Fantastic, you know, speak out and be outrageous, and take those risks. And part of me says, but stay in relationship with us. Because, you know, some people have been very aware of the looming ecological crisis and no climate emergency for decades. Some people have been very aware a lot of activists, a lot of scientists, a lot of psychologists have known, but lots of people haven't, the vast majority haven't. So I think the vast majority have been living with this kind of hope that something would get sorted out. Soon, sooner or later, you know, something else would be done. Now, you could say that that's a kind of child-like hope or belief in others to rescue us. But I think if we direct too much anger and frustration at those people, then we will alienate them and we will terrify them. And we need to take them with us. They need to be positive, those discussions with children. Does that make

sense? Yeah, maybe maybe a lot of people have been a little bit asleep. And the recent activist work of Extinction Rebellion, and the David Attenborough documentary, it's doing a phenomenal job of waking people up.

Verity

My husband went up to the Extinction Rebellion, one of the marches, and we chose partly from a practical point of view, not to take our son. And on the David Attenborough, I've had friends of mine who sat down and watched it with their children, and actually at the same age, so we're talking 9 to 10 year olds, actually, eight and 10 these kids were, and actually, I thought, whoa, it didn't occur to me to sit down and watch that with my son. And I'm actually really pleased. I didn't because oh, it's devastated me.

Caroline

So it's interesting, isn't it? Maybe we need some programmes to be made that are more tolerable for children. So it gives those messages in a sort of more easily digestible way, which is not so traumatising. I mean, that documentary was had an impact. You know, I was devastated. You know, the image of the orang utan is..

Verity

You know, I still want to cry. And I don't want to think about it..

Caroline

That's exactly what happens. Yeah, you know, we hear that and we touch our own feelings. And then, of course, you want to protect your child from that. I also know parents who sat down and watched that documentary with their children, I think they chose to do that. And I've also asked some of those children, whether that was a good thing afterwards. And some of the children have said, yes, they thought it was a good thing, because it gave them information. But I could see that it was also a struggle for them to fully take on board all of that information. So I think they were editing and they were filtering, maybe not all at once. So maybe watch chunks of that documentary. Yeah. Well, maybe we need to make a documentary, which is more suited for younger children.

Verity

I remember Iceland{British shopping chain} made an advert when they pledged to take oil out of all their products. And they made a cartoon around it an orang-utan is kind of running riot in a little girl's bedroom. And then she was trying to get rid of it, and saying 'go back to your forest.' And this orang utan turns around and says 'ok I will go but let me just tell you why I can't go. And why I'm running riot in your bedroom. Because, you know, humans are running riot in the forest.' And I did share that with my son. And he thought that was exactly right. It was just pitched exactly right.

Caroline

Could he hear the message in that?

Verity

Oh, totally. Yeah. And, you know, he's very aware of, of palm oil and all those things. So I think you're right, I think the media, you know, does have an overall part to play. But it does bring me, Caroline, to this frustration I have, that he's at primary school, and they don't get taught any of it.

And I don't think it really gets taught in secondary either, you know, climate change, isn't

there. And it's something that I'm extremely angry about in my own upbringing. And why weren't we taught- I was sitting around learning about oxbow lakes and all the rest of it. Nobody ever mentioned that this was happening.

Caroline

No, no, I know. And one of my favourite books at the moment that I'm reading was written in 1991, saying, 'you've got to act, you've got to do something. Now!'. It's the Confessions of an Eco Warrior. And he says, you know, 'the time is now. It's urgent.' And that was 1991. And I asked a group of women in sustainability, the other day, when did they think these statements were written? And some of them were suggesting they were written in the 1960s. And, in a way, they were right, they could have been written in the 1960s. So to some extent, there's been a mixture of disinformation, and preventing the wider public from getting access to this. Maybe there's been a kind of mass infantilization of us, keeping the truth from us, because of the drive towards economic development?

We can't answer those questions without looking politically and economically, at the way the world has been driven towards development. It would be very inconvenient, wouldn't it- that's what Al Gore says is 'The Inconvenient Truth' - It would have been very inconvenient to then start to deal with those dilemmas earlier, because it would have blocked or slowed down some that capitalist expansion. So I can only suggest that that's part of the reason we weren't told generally, but we're at the point now where we have no choice and that's what makes it different. You know, humans often wait until they have no choice about making change. And then when you're at the point where you have no choice, then they start to take action. And that's the kind of point that we're at, I think, where we have no choice now, we can't absorb that message with one and then continue to turn a blind eye, and kind of carry on as before, we have no choice now.

So yeah, so you're asking me, what can we actually do? Yeah. practical solutions? Well, I think absolutely crucial behind this is to start to give children messages - and you can do this in small, easily tolerable ways to teach them about having a need-focussed life, Judith Anderson coined this idea, I was talking with her about having a 'need-focussed' life rather than a 'want-focussed' life. So it's what do we need rather than what do we want? And those are the sorts of decisions we need to start to be moving towards, because you might want plastic dinosaurs, but do you need them? And what's the consequence of having hundreds of plastic dinosaurs, which are throwaway cheap objects, *show* the child what happens to that plastic, *show* them that it never degrades, it never goes away, these crisp packets which have arrived on beaches, you know, from 30 -40 years ago, if we show the child that and give them choices - they shouldn't be taking responsibility about how to clean up this mess we've made, but they can make significant choices. If children exercise their consumer power, about no longer buying cheap throwaway plastic toys it would change the way that we engage with consumerism around children overnight, quite honestly. So you know, so move them towards that sort of thing.

And you can put that into everyday conversation in your home. And I think what happens a lot of the time when we're around children is we have these conversations in our heads, but we don't share them with the child. So have you talked with your child about which milk you buy? And why you choose to buy the milk that you buy? So has that been a conversation you've had in your head for us?

Verity

Yeah.

Caroline

So he's heard your conversation?

Verity

Yeah. So we so we, we hardly have any cow's milk anymore. So, and he chooses rice milk -whether that's based on the state of the planet or just personal taste, I don't know? But it probably is. Because we do we do have these sorts of chats, and the coming to the toys thing, you know, definitely. I think I probably grumble quite a lot, you know, at another plastic thing. And, and he is very aware aware that plastic doesn't break down. But I still feel like a killjoy, because it's just the way childhood is now aren't they? They're they're almost saturated with toys. Some bedrooms are just insane with the amount of stuff. Whereas only a couple of generations ago, you know, to go out and just play with your wooden car that your grandpa made you was enough. And, and it's it's so complicated, but that's whole thing that you navigate

Caroline

Yeah, sure. But what's complicated there is your feelings, not his feelings. So it's your fear of being a killjoy that might prevent you from fully engaging with that dilemma with him. And if you shared that dilemma with him and said, 'I don't want to spoil things for you. But in the short term, maybe we've got to actually make these short term decisions in order to get something better in the long term.' Does that make sense?

I was talking with a friend of mine about this. And she said, for her, what gets her completely incensed is party goodie bags, which are absolutely full of rubbish. But there's a cultural tradition if you've got to produce them. And I said to her, 'Well, what would happen if you didn't? What would happen if you said, No, I'm not going to do that.' She said, 'Well, you know, the other children may not understand and they may get ostracised from their peer group', and, and then she said there was a whole debate amongst her and her friends, because one woman said, we don't want sweets in those goodie bags, right? Because we don't want the sugar in there. But plastic is better than sugar. And then my friend Emma was like, 'No, actually, sugar is better than plastic.' Because in the short term, having a few sweets is not so damaging. But in the long term, the plastic is more damaging. And it's about being able to kind of have those discussions with yourself and your friends, and then navigate your way through ,but it would be helpful if your group of friends could all make that change at the same time, because otherwise your individual child will feel ostracised 'they're the one who's not allowed plastic'. And that could get mean in playgrounds , I understand that.

But, to get back to the point you made about schools, I think they're slowly starting to wake up. I've had some really good responses from schools when I've offered to go in and talk to the children. We did a fantastic research project a few years ago with a group of primary school children, grew a whale on their school playing field, with two and a half thousand crocus bulbs – never doing that again, where we talked with children - This was at Killearn (?) primary school - to talk to children about the impact of climate change on whales. And how, if we protect whales, that will help avoid some of the worst climate change because whales suck four hundred thousand tonnes of carbon per year out of the air. I can also tell you wonderful things- I love working with children - like how much are baby humpback whale pees every day? Which I can answer - it is a bathful. (I love it, because they ask

you these questions). And 'I'm like I don't know, but I'll find out, then', because they drink a bathful of milk every day.

So we sketched out, using organic paint, this whale on the school playing field. We measured it out with the children. And we planted the bulbs. And we talked to them about whales, and we got them drawing whales. And we talked about the impacts of climate change on whales and warming oceans, and krill. And how this would you know, impact on whales in the long term - this was in Wiltshire.

And then the whale grew. This whale grew on the school playing field and just emerged a few months later, what was so interesting was before these little bulbs appeared above the ground, the children wanted to protect the whale, and they put it circle of chairs around where the whale was going to grow. And stopped the parents walking across it. And they had an understanding about the importance in relationally of protecting the whale. And that in turn would help them. So we built understanding of climate change in the climate crisis and the ecological crisis with children through talking about things they could understand or relate to, which is the natural world, through whales, through wolves, through talking to them about the impacts of climate change on their pets, and on their oak trees. So we use local as well as global examples, but from the natural world. David Attenborough says, children use nature and animals as a gymnasium for their own emotions. So they learn about emotional relatability, through a relationship with animals, with pets. So that's what we're used to as a way in as a gateway to talk about this.

Verity

So, sounds to me, like a brilliant idea would be that every primary school and probably secondary schools had regular visits at this point in time from a climate psychologist, because you know, we can't let the teachers or, you know, kind of let them feel that they are responsible for taking this on, as well as everything else they do. I mean, you know, how can we encourage our schools to do that, to get somebody like yourself to come in? How does that actually practically work? What do you have to do?

Caroline

I think it's a really good idea, let's send this podcast out to all the schools and say, 'Well, people from the Climate Psychology Alliance would be more than happy to come out and talk to your schools, we can go into school assemblies, we can run research projects, like I've just been describing, but that does take longer'.

Verity

And takes funds?

Caroline

It took a little bit of funds, we got some funding from the University of Bath, which is great. But we've also got a group of us from the university who have been going out to do talks in schools, we've taken a scientist, and we've taken myself, and we've given both talks at the same time. So we've talked about climate science and climate psychology.

So we've given them the facts, and given them the psychology and how they're going to

feel. And I think that really helps engage children, because we shouldn't just be talking to them about how they feel, we need to give them the facts, we need to give them evidence that they can absorb and that they can make sense of, at the same time as talking to them about how they feel.

So bringing that back to parents for who it might be a bit much just go straight to the climate crisis, but we could, as parents and adults, talk to children about the way climate change impacts on animals first, and then bring it to think about how is climate change going to impact on you? And then me? Does that make sense?

Because children know about climate change in polar bears. It's an iconic image, it's used everywhere, they can talk about that. And that introduces them to some of the more complex feelings that they're going to be feeling. And then you can give them the message, at the same time, of how do you feel about what's happening to polar bears? 'It's sad, isn't it?' And it might make you upset and it might make you feel grief stricken, or I would not use the word grief stricken, but yeah, 'you might feel grief. It might make you feel a bit angry, it might make you feel a bit bad. And it's okay to have these feelings.' So you can have that way of introducing them to that range of emotional feelings. I think telling stories works really well. So you talked about that advert. There's some really nice books coming out. And indigenous people have got lots of stories about how to deal with crisis in the world, how to deal with change in the world. So I think there's all sorts of resources out there that we could go to. I think that's the future for podcasts.

Verity

Yeah isn't it just! And websites even, for definite, yeah. resources. How to talk to children about climate change.

Caroline

I think we can get some of those resources on the CPA website. And we've also got a very active Google group. And there's lots of parents, they're been talking about, how should we talk to our children, and they're talking about their own children are talking about children in their practice? We had a fantastic discussion recently about whether to take children up to London to see the buckets of blood being spilled on the floor. And whether that would be too much for children and what age children we could expose that to, or whether you know, your son,

Verity

What came out of that? What did people say?

Caroline

It was variable.. So it depends on the age of the child depends on the individual child. certainly a lot of the children I work with, have got traumatised histories and for them, then I would say no, I would not want to take them and see something as awful as that, in a raw state. I might talk to them about it. So they can start to imagine it before I actually showed them it in reality.

I think if a child is securely attached in a securely attached family, whether that's birth family, or adoptive family, or foster family, doesn't matter. So long as they've got those secure attachments, and they feel contained and safe. And they know it's safe to talk about these things. Then you could edge towards exposing them to those sorts of things,

but maybe do it through pictures first, maybe ask the child is this too much? Or is this enough? How would you like us to talk to you about these things?
I think present children with a dilemma as well.

Verity

You asked a child this very question last night?

Caroline

Yes. I certainly I did. My friends skyped and I said I needed a six year old to ask this. So she skyped me from Sweden last night with her child ,who knows me - So this wasn't 'you're gonna Skype a strange woman to talk about this'? you know, -so she wasn't going to scare her child. So there was lots of 'Hello, how are you'? And then I showed her Murphy. So we had lots of kind of little chats? About my dog. Yes ..so Murphy got involved. So we had a little chats about these things. But she's also being interviewed by me for my research in the past.

So she's kind of conditioned?

She's, she's, she's used to these conversations. And also her mom is involved, as a chemical engineer ,in a group I'm working with at the university. So they have a lot of those conversations. So if this wasn't too scary for her - that was the plan anyway. So I said to her, 'how do you want us to talk to you about difficult things?' And she said, Well, she said, 'I do and I don't?' And I thought, 'Well, actually, that's a genius response to actually remember with children, they both need to be exposed to this and protected from it at the same time'. Does that make sense?

We spoke of the dilemma. We spoke about not doing too much too soon, we spoke about using stories. She said she doesn't want to be over protected, because then that's lying to her. And it's treating her like a baby. And she's not a baby. So she doesn't want to be treated like a baby. She doesn't want to be over protected.

But she said she wants to be able to trust us, to give her the information in bite sized chunks, so that *she* doesn't feel it's her responsibility. Because children can quickly feel it's their responsibility to do something about this situation. I think we have to be really clear with them that we've created this, it's our responsibility to deal with it. We want to share with them' how should we be dealing with it?' And we want them to inform us about how we should be dealing with this , but we should ask them about how much they know, before we start that conversation but that we shouldn't be expecting them to take responsibility for dealing with it that's really important. but she was very clear, don't over protect me. So I think part of the difficulty that parents have, when they start to relate to this is this awful fear that they will hurt their children, they will damage them

Verity

Yes, definitely that's at the root of it, for me

Caroline

Yeah, from anywhere, they will give them something which is just too much for them to cope with. But I think there is another way to think about this, that if you don't talk to your children, you're withholding something from them. But if you do talk to your children about something that despite the fact that it's painful and difficult, you are giving them something which helps them grow. And it helps them grow emotionally, and it helps them grow

psychologically, because our children need to grow into dealing with the world that we are creating. And so they need the skills and they need the language and they need something from us. If we overprotect in a way we're not doing well. In a service, So there's a way to think about this. And the way to think about this is drawing and this drawing. Okay, so we've got three plant pots, here, . So we've got a little seed in each plant pot.

And in plant pot number one, we've got just ordinary soft soil. Okay. And in plant pot number three, we've got rocks over our little seed. So it's quite hard then, for the seed to make it to the surface. Yes. So there's no obstruction between the seeds and the surface in number one. Yeah, there's rocks in the way in number three.

Number one is too little information. So what's going to happen is the seed will grow. And then it'll collapse. Yeah, it's just that that stalk is not a resilient shape, it's just a straight shape, And then number three, where the rocks, the seed will start to grow, but it'll get distorted and stunted. And hurt by that.

The ideal growing conditions are compost soil, with grit, bits of grit in them. So I'm drawing in plump up number two, lots of bits of grit, so the seed will start to grow, and we'll hit the grit. But each time it hits a bit of grit, it'll grow around the grit. So what you end up with is this very resilient stalk that comes out and it's not straight., and it's not too scrunchy either.

Verity

So you're making the analogy that these bits of grit are information?

Caroline

Information, stories, exposing them to small things which are manageable, palatable, tolerable, meaningful to the child stories, pictures, animals, and that's a way of making it tolerable, that will help the child develop resilience, and help them face what's coming, and give them the skills and the emotional intelligence that they need in order to face what's coming. Because we've got to prepare them for it. We've got to do that thoughtfully, wisely, kindly. And playfully. Yeah.

Verity

And that's a very key word., isnt it?

Caroline

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So that's another podcast, isn't it? to play with painful things? So do those plants help?

So the idea is in thinking about that, I would hope to reduce your guilt and your anxiety as a parent, take you away from this, 'should I talk to him? Shouldn't I talk to him?' Because..., you must talk to him., but you got to keep that model in mind.

Verity

Yeah.

Caroline

..And that should reduce your guilt, but also show you and give you a model in mind of this is the way to talk to him. Not too much, but not too little. And that I'm helping him by

introducing painful things to him.

Verity

Caroline, I think this is a huge topic. And I think we should come back to it in our podcast series. And I think we should get some children in here.

Caroline

Agreed

Verity

..to do exactly these things. So we can all kind of listen in and, you know, to hear you as a professional psychologist talking to a child I think would be really valuable for people. So let's do that. I look forward to it. Thank you.

That was Caroline Hickman, climate psychologist and Teaching Fellow at the University of Bath. And I'm Verity Sharp. Climate Crisis Conversations is a podcast series hosted by the Climate Psychology Alliance and produced by Parity Audio. More information is in our show notes ,and do join us again for our next conversation. Until then, take care

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