Children today live in a complex world with numerous stressors on their mental health and well-being. From living through the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching impacts to gun violence in schools, racism, and threats to civil and human rights and democracy, the uncertainties surrounding youth safety and security are growing.

Our climate continues to change at an alarming rate. Between 2011–2020, temperatures increased 1.1 °C above what they were between 1850–1900 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). This change has translated into hot summer days, poor air quality, and severe storms, often times occurring at the same time in different areas of the country. In July 2023, the world experienced some of its hottest days on record (Feedman, 2023).

These changes have immediate physical health impacts on children, including but not limited to injury, asthma, waterborne and vectorborne diseases, heatstroke, and malnutrition (Clayton et al., 2021).

The impacts of climate change on mental health are, in some ways, even more concerning, beginning as early as in utero with ongoing exposure increasing the impacts. Research suggests that exposure to environmental stressors in utero might increase the risk of cognitive dysfunction in children (Vergunst & Berry, 2022). Another study shows an increase in mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression among children who were in utero during Hurricane Sandy (Nomura et al., 2023). Children and youths who experience traumatic events such as extreme weather or wildfires may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. Many young people face “climate anxiety,” which is a chronic fear of climate or environmental-related doom. Further, research shows that exposure to polluted air increases the risk of poor mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Latham et al., 2021; Lu, 2020; Trombley, 2023).

Environmental health professionals can play a key role to help support the mental health of children in the face of climate change. Just as climate change impacts children and youth in many ways, there is also a wide range of ways that environmental health professionals can act.

Some of these ways include:

1. Education and Awareness: Many educational resources are available, whether they are for yourself or for a young person in your life. The American Public Health Association (2020) created a Climate and Health Youth Education Toolkit designed for public health professionals. Connecting with and empowering high school students on climate change and health is a powerful way to use your experience as an environmental health professional. By educating yourself on the issue—such as completing the Climate for Health Ambassador Training (Climate for Health, n.d.)—you can help build awareness and encourage your colleagues to get involved in taking action, too.

2. Risk Assessment: Environmental health professionals who assess the risk of air pollution, flood waters, and other environmental hazards are already taking action on climate change. If the risks to children’s mental health are not already being evaluated, making sure they are included in risk assessments could help understand the severity of the impacts. This process starts with conversations with your colleagues and other partners...
about the risks children face, including negative mental health outcomes as a result of air pollution exposure.

3. **Community Resilience Building**: Many environmental health professionals work in local communities. As a member of your community, you can support community resilience by ensuring that local disaster preparedness plans are in place that take climate risks into account. Advocate for young people in your area so that their voices are heard and their perspectives are included in the plans. Making sure that all communities are equipped for climate-related emergencies might include, for example, designating buildings as cooling stations during heat waves or advocating for increased access to green space. Listening to the voices of young people, particularly from under-represented groups and communities of color, will strengthen the final action plan with their perspectives. Climate for Health (2021a) has put together a Climate Solutions for Your Community resource document that may help.

4. **Support Parents**: Supporting parents is critical in the time of climate change because the well-being of children can be influenced by not only their experiences but also the experiences of others around them, especially their caregivers. Parents and caregivers often struggle to regain their own emotional stability after extreme events, which impacts their ability to offer support to their children (Zacher et al., 2022). Including parents and caregivers in resilience and preparation efforts can help identify their needs and link them with supportive resources.

5. **Policy and Systems Change**: You can educate policymakers and push for better climate change and mental health policies at community, state, and federal levels. One resource that may help you get started is Climate Solutions: Advocacy With Policy Makers (Climate for Health, 2021b). Also, look for ways to support young people as they advocate for change. There have been impressive actions presented by young people, such as the U.S. House of Representatives resolution that was authored by Schools for Climate Action and promotes youth mental health (Promoting Youth Mental Health, 2023). The voice of environmental health professionals matters and can help young leaders make lasting change.

6. **Research**: The field of children’s mental health and climate change is growing. Additional research on the impacts, as well as on effective interventions and solutions, is necessary to continue guiding community leaders, policymakers, parents, health professionals, and educators in the right direction. The ecoAmerica (2023) report, Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report 2023, summarizes much of the current research. More research on impacts and effective responses can help families and health professionals to support children in a changing climate.

While we have presented some ways that environmental health professionals can get involved in protecting and advocating for the mental health of children, this list is not exhaustive. There is a plethora of actions that environmental professionals can take. You are likely already taking some actions to increase community resilience or to mitigate climate impacts in your personal and professional lives (Climate for Health, 2021c, 2021d). Look for ways to connect colleagues, family, and neighbors with this work (Climate for Health, 2021a), especially in the context of protecting children’s health. The library of resources to help people get involved is growing and your voice as an environmental health professional can make a difference.

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