

OPEN LETTER

CLIMATE SCIENCE, NOT CLIMATE SILENCE

Safe, accurate climate education & evidence-based support helps, not harms, young Australians' mental health

We are more than 300 climate and mental health organisations, researchers, psychologists, educators, doctors, young people and community leaders who work at the intersection of climate change and youth mental health.

There has been a rise in mis and dis-information suggesting that climate education and mental health support are causing climate anxiety in children and adolescents in Australia. In May 2025, the Institute of Public Affairs released a [report](#) claiming that “alarmist” climate education is causing mental distress in pre-adolescent Australians. It recommended scaling back, or even removing, climate education from primary schools (and potentially secondary schools) to protect young people. On 20 May 2026, another [report](#) was released, this time arguing that both climate education and particular approaches/strategies for supporting children and young people experiencing climate distress are causing psychological harm. The report called for removing the sustainability cross-curriculum priority and proposing the ‘treatment’ of children and young people’s concerns via potentially inappropriate mental health interventions. Both reports’ claims are built on shaky ground: misquoting research, ignoring context, and most of all, missing the point.

Climate education and support strategies aren’t the problem. When done well, climate education doesn’t alarm; it empowers children and young people, equipping them with the skills to thrive in a changing climate. And when support strategies are implemented effectively, they build the resilience and coping capacity of children and young people, fostering their wellbeing over time.

In short:

- ✓ **We agree** that climate distress in young Australians is real and rising.
- ✗ **We reject** that climate science and support are causing climate distress- the evidence points to real-world climate impacts, not education, as the primary driver of distress.
- ✓ **We agree** that climate education should be developmentally appropriate and delivered with care for young people's wellbeing.
- ✗ **We reject** that the solution is less climate education - silencing young people's climate concerns does not protect their mental health, it undermines it. Instead, good climate education, which is accurate, holistic, developmentally-appropriate and psychologically safe, builds emotional resilience.
- ✓ **We agree** that all responses to climate distress should be based on the best available evidence, and tailored to young people's climate concerns. But we caution identifying climate distress as a pathological anxiety, where treating it as such misrepresents both the evidence and young people's experience, and could result in inappropriate mental health interventions.

Our ask: This is why we are calling for safe, accurate climate science education and evidence-based approaches to help parents, teachers, clinicians, and the broader community build the emotional resilience, agency, and hope of the next generation.

We agree: *Climate distress in young Australians is real and rising*

There is a problem - young Australians are becoming increasingly distressed about climate change and other converging global challenges: biodiversity loss, economic instability, geopolitical uncertainty and the state of the planet. A 2023 study found that 67% of young Australians are concerned about climate change ([Orygen 2023](#)). New data suggests that 76% of young Australians experience negative impacts on their wellbeing, safety, or daily life due to climate change and related environmental issues ([Orygen, 2026](#)).

This distress is not irrational, but a valid emotional response to a very real crisis. Across our sunburnt country, young Australians are already experiencing more frequent and severe droughts, floods, bushfires and other extreme weather events, and will continue to do so in the decades ahead. They've seen homes destroyed, species lost, food prices soar, and political leaders delay critical decisions. Contrary to what the IPA report suggests, this is not a future, invisible or abstract threat: 84% of Australians have been directly affected by climate disasters between 2019 and 2022 ([Climate Council 2024](#)).

The critical point, however, is that avoiding discussion of young people's lived climate reality does not protect them; instead, it causes more harm. This harm is caused not by learning or talking about climate change, but by *failing* to hear, validate, and respond to real fears, grief, uncertainty, and loss of hope that young people have already experienced ([Climate Psychology Alliance 2025](#)) - a "socially constructed silence" that causes loneliness, isolation, and anxiety.

We reject: *Climate science is the cause of climate anxiety*

Climate anxiety or 'climate distress' (a term describing rational emotional responses to climate change), is not caused by climate science, just as cancer research does not cause cancer anxiety. Research shows that what distresses young people is the reality of climate change, its escalating impacts, the failure of leadership to act, and the failure of adults to listen to their concerns ([Sanson & Dubicka 2022](#); [Jones & Lucas 2023](#); [Orygen 2023](#)).

Young people are already absorbing information about climate change through social media, news, family conversations, schoolyards, and lived experience of climate disasters. Schools offer a rare and valuable opportunity to correct and ground that information in facts, build community and emotional resilience, and provide constructive pathways forward.

Young people are asking for it themselves, as we have recently learned in a series of workshops with young Australians from every state and territory ([Connecting Climate Minds](#)). When asked what they wanted for their future, young Australians asked for more, and not less, climate education that tells the truth and equips them to act for the future they want ([Connecting Climate Minds](#)). This is demonstrated in other studies as well ([Curious Climate Schools](#); [Newberry Le Vay et al., 2023](#)).

We agree: *Climate education must be developmentally appropriate and emotionally safe*

We agree that climate education must be improved. The curriculum is inconsistent, siloed, not solutions-focused and often lacks guidance for teachers to deliver it safely or constructively ([APS, 2019](#); [Russell, 2024](#); [Tytler & Freebody 2023](#)). Many teachers acknowledge they lack training and support ([Beasy et al., 2023](#)).

We believe emotionally safe, age-appropriate climate education is both possible and necessary. Developmental psychology and education research shows that climate education can be gradually introduced across primary and secondary school in age-appropriate ways that align with young people's cognitive and emotional abilities, building understanding and resilience over time ([Tytler & Freebody, 2023](#)).

Yes, climate change is confronting, but so are topics like death or illness, and we don't shield children from those. There is strong evidence that children, even in primary school, are capable of engaging with complex topics when supported by honest, developmentally appropriate teaching ([Cancer Research](#)). In fact, avoidance, rather than explanation, can lead to greater confusion, fear and anxiety ([Pinksy et al., 2020](#)).

We reject: *Climate silence as the solution*

The solution to climate distress is not *less* education. It's *better* education. We need climate education which is accurate, holistic, developmentally-appropriate and psychologically safe that:

- provides comprehensive, developmentally appropriate climate science, grounds local environmental experiences into global systems, and spotlights the many climate solutions to build comprehension, hope and agency in young people;
- upholds the cross-curriculum priority of sustainability and embeds climate education across subjects so that technical knowledge is scaffolded with growing skills across multiple domains;
- integrates trauma-aware, mental health-informed approaches that help young people process their emotions, build coping tools, take action and find support;
- invests in teacher training, curriculum reform, and community-wide education to build an ecosystem of support; and
- honours First Nations knowledge, which has sustained communities and Country for over 50,000 years, and continues to offer guidance on adaptation, care and collective resilience.

We agree: *All responses to climate distress should be based on the best-available evidence.*

It's also worth noting that climate anxiety or distress is not a clinical mental health disorder ([Seth et al., 2023](#)). Feeling anxious can be understood as a normal and evolutionarily adaptive human response to perceived threats, helping to motivate protective action and drive changes ([Grupe et al., 2013](#)). While this rational emotional response can be severe, and young people themselves identify the need for ongoing psychosocial and educational support to help them manage their concerns about climate change whilst pursuing their everyday activities and striving towards their future aspirations, they see the real solutions to their distress as systemic climate action ([Connecting Climate Minds](#)). Silence and inaction on climate change only fuels their distress ([Hickman et al., 2021](#)).

We agree that all responses to young people's climate concerns should be based on the best available evidence and comprehensively evaluated for their safety and effectiveness.

The intervention landscape remains in its early stages, and the field is still awaiting published evidence on which mental health, psychosocial, and related interventions work, for whom, in which contexts and when ([Newberry Le Vay et al., 2024](#); [Xue et al., 2024](#)). However, existing evidence suggests interventions targeting hope and meaning-based coping (establishing purpose, personal values and collective efficacy when facing challenges) are likely to be effective, which the school environments are perfectly equipped to cultivate ([Clayton 2020](#); [Nimo TKOA et al., 2026](#)). In contrast, some therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which focuses on identifying and reframing maladaptive thoughts and behaviours, may be less helpful in this context.

The experts authoring this Open Letter are working collaboratively with young people, educators and teachers to design and evaluate various psychosocial, behavioural, and education-focussed interventions and programs. Working alongside young people, educators and teachers, we are drawing on their collective expertise to ensure that any intervention or support program meaningfully addresses young people's needs, priorities and concerns.

Our ask: *Let's educate, support and empower generations of Australians*

We need a national commitment to accurate, developmentally appropriate and psychologically safe climate education and evidence-based mental health support. Our goal must be to give young people the tools to understand the world around them, manage complex emotions, and take meaningful action for their future and communities.

Climate change is the defining challenge of this generation. We know our children are facing a tough future, and we know that preparation is key to successful adaptation. What young people need is the knowledge, emotional resilience and support to weather the climate reality. It is also what they want. Let's deliver safe climate science, not climate silence.

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BE THE FUTURE

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SURFERS CLIMATE

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STOP SAY FUND TO GO NATURE

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Vote Earth Now!

C₂Zero Neutral is not enough

CJU CLIMATE JUSTICE UNION

ARRCC Australian Religious Response to Climate Change

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