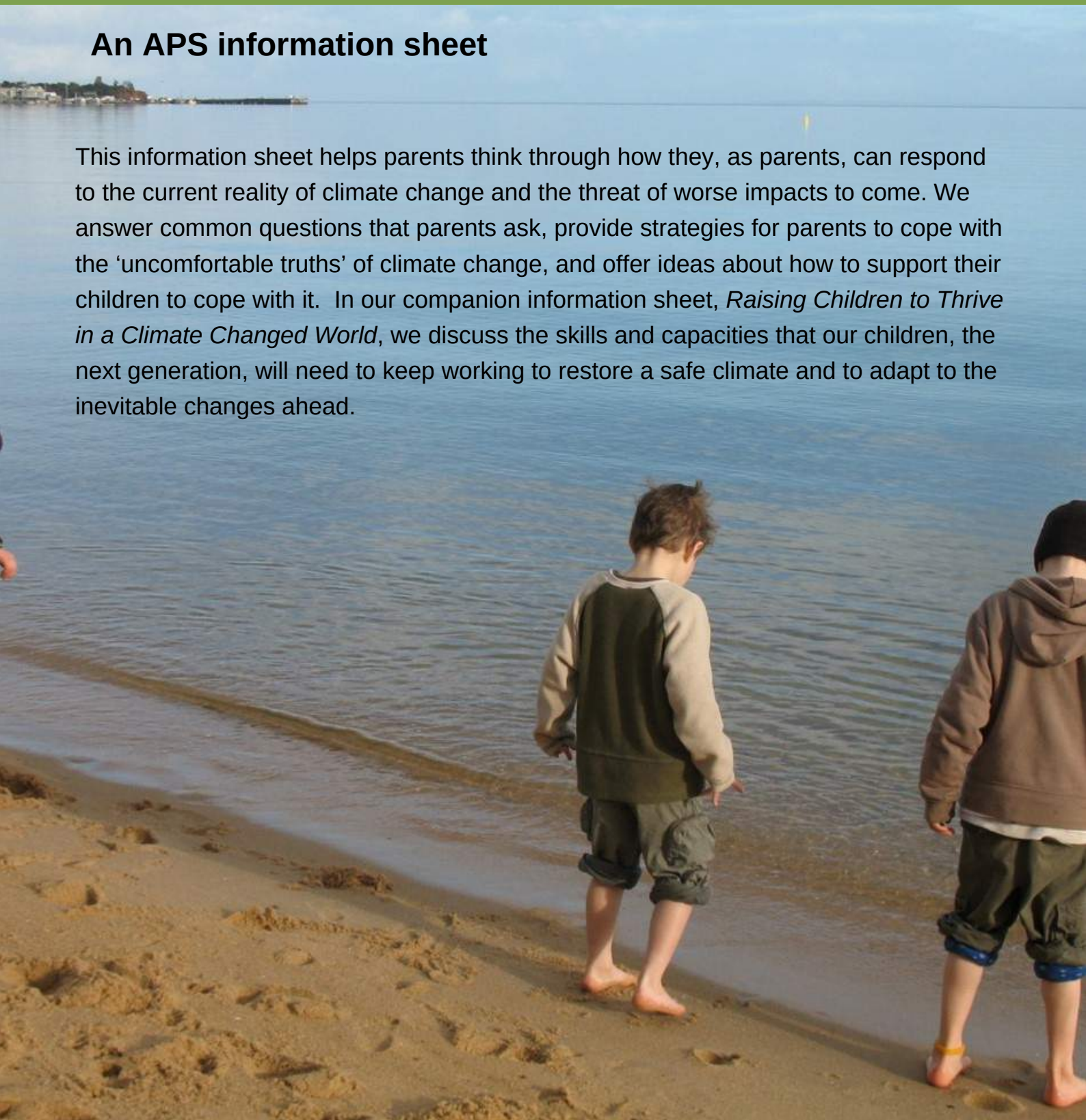


A GUIDE FOR PARENTS ABOUT THE CLIMATE CRISIS

An APS information sheet

This information sheet helps parents think through how they, as parents, can respond to the current reality of climate change and the threat of worse impacts to come. We answer common questions that parents ask, provide strategies for parents to cope with the 'uncomfortable truths' of climate change, and offer ideas about how to support their children to cope with it. In our companion information sheet, *Raising Children to Thrive in a Climate Changed World*, we discuss the skills and capacities that our children, the next generation, will need to keep working to restore a safe climate and to adapt to the inevitable changes ahead.



INTRODUCTION

Parents face many challenges as they strive to bring up their children with the best possible opportunities for their future health, happiness, and success. Understandably, immediate concerns often take our attention, like worrying about how your children are getting along at school, and how they are using their time on social media! But parents have always thought about longer-term factors that might impact on their children's future. Today, climate change is one of the most certain, wide-ranging, and concerning of these issues.

Many parents are seriously concerned about how climate change will affect their children, and can see that the world their children will grow up in will be changed dramatically. Some parents might worry about how their child will cope with a climate changed world. Others might be particularly concerned about the human suffering that it will cause at a global level. Others again might be distressed at the damage that climate change will do to the natural environment, the loss of favourite places (like the Great Barrier Reef), and the depleted world their children and grandchildren will grow up in. Whatever their motivations, many parents want to do something about it but are not sure what.

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN MY CHILDREN ARE READY TO HEAR ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

The best way to find out if your children are ready to talk about climate change is to listen carefully to what they say and the questions they ask. Most school-aged children, and even many pre-school aged children, already know a bit about climate change and other environmental issues from school or the media.

They might report something they have heard ("Danny's Mum says last year was hotter than any other year" or "We watched a video at school about the Great Barrier Reef dying"), or ask why you are recycling plastics, or why there was a big flood somewhere, or why Jenny's Dad rides his bike to work.

You can use these questions as opportunities to open up conversation. (See below for ideas about how to talk to children of different ages.)

If your child never raises the issue, it may be because they know nothing about it, or perhaps because they are too anxious to raise it.

You can provide opportunities for conversation by explaining why you do things in language your child can understand: "I don't use plastic shopping bags because they are bad for the world/made from coal and oil which are making the Earth too hot"; "I catch the train to work because cars use petrol which makes the world too hot"; "I'm writing a letter to the school to ask them to put solar panels on the roof".

You will know from their responses whether they want to talk more about it.

You can also ask them directly if they have heard about climate change and, if so, how they feel about it.

WHAT DO I SAY TO MY CHILDREN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

For very young children, talk about the environmentally-friendly things you do every day and help them learn to appreciate and care for the natural world:

- “We put food scraps in the compost bin so the worms and other little creatures can make good soil for growing veggies and flowers.”
- “Let’s buy these apples and pop them in our own bag, not those ones which have got all that plastic around them.”
- “Let’s go by train so we don’t have to use petrol.”

Tell them you want them to have a beautiful and healthy world to grow up in, and so you are helping to stop the world getting too hot.

Share your love for the natural world with them – e.g. by going on picnics and camping, watching birds, planting trees and flowers and then watching them grow.

Read books to them about climate change or environmental problems like ‘The Magic School Bus and the Climate Challenge’ by Joanna Cole, or ‘The Lorex’, by Dr Zeuss.



FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Respond to their questions and comments about climate change with simple but honest answers.

E.g., “The Earth is getting hotter because we have used too much stuff like petrol, gas, and plastic”.

OR “At the moment, electricity is mostly made from burning coal and gas, and that makes gases that make the Earth too hot - we need to change to using the sun and wind to make electricity”.

OR “We have to save water because we haven’t had as much rain as usual this year because the climate is changing”.

- Be ready to follow-up your answers with more details if they ask for more.
- Acknowledge that climate change is a big problem and tell them you are working with many others to try to fix it.

- Read books to/with them about climate change like the ‘Down-to-Earth Guide To Global Warming’, by Laurie David.
- Talk about climate change in everyday situations. E.g., “We’re not going to take our car today - we’re riding - because by not burning fossil fuels today we are doing something to help reduce climate change. And it’s a good way of getting strong and healthy too”.
- Share your thoughts about consumerism and materialism.



FOR OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Most teenagers will probably know quite a lot about climate change – maybe even more than you do! Some teenagers may welcome long conversations about climate change at the dinner table. Others may feel cynical or despairing about finding a solution and want to avoid the topic.

- You can research the science of climate change together (or let your child educate you!).
- Don't be afraid to talk about the political side. Together you might analyse different parties' positions on climate change.

Whatever the age of your children, always be sure to:

- Point out that many people are working to stop the climate changing too much.
- Explain that there are things that everyone can do to help, like recycling, writing letters, etc.
- Point out that big problems have been solved in the past through many people working together.
- Discuss what you and your child can do to make a difference. (See below for some ideas.)





HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE MY CHILDREN TO CARE ABOUT NATURE?

There are a few stages of connecting with nature which most children go through before they are ready to be able to feel concern for the environment, and before they feel responsible and motivated to act for it (like taking action on climate change). First, children have to at least feel at ease and comfortable in nature. After they have experience of being 'in' nature, they then develop the capacity to be 'with' nature. This is where they start to notice landscapes and get busy and involved in activities in nature, and then start to feel attached to nature.

The final phase is when children start to be 'for' nature, where they start to take care of it.

Parents can help their children to first be 'in' nature, then 'with' nature, so that they are finally ready to be 'for' nature:

- Give your children opportunities to be in nature.
- Find environments that allow your children to have a nature connection. These are environments that might entertain children, inspire awe, engage their senses, surprise them, and inspire physical activity, among other things.
- Where possible, take children on family holidays in a natural environment.
- Let your children spend free and unstructured time in nature so they can bond or 'fall in love' with nature.
- Enroll young children in programs like 'bush kinders' or school holiday programs that are held in the natural environment so they can regularly learn, explore, and play in natural spaces.
- Give children responsibility for caring for living things.
- Praise children when you notice them doing something that is good for the environment.

HOW DO I RESPOND TO MY CHILDREN'S FEELINGS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

Your children might feel worried or sad or helpless or even angry about climate change. It is also quite likely that children are confused about the facts and do not know if they are personally threatened.

Talking with children about these things can be helpful:

- Give them opportunities to talk about things that worry or concern them in general.
- Ask them what they know about climate change and listen for their feelings as well as their knowledge.
- Show them that you understand that they feel that way and validate their feelings (E.g., “It makes sense that you feel worried when you think about climate change – I do too”).
- Let them know that talking about how they feel, rather than holding it inside, can be good for them.
- Help them to put words to their feelings.

- Use personal stories to show how you have come to learn about climate change, why you think about it the way you do, and how you try to deal with the difficult feelings that come up. (For more examples of how to do this, see the section below on ‘hope’.)

- Practice with them a range of ways of calming themselves down when they are upset, like slow breathing, self-talk (E.g., saying things to themselves like “take it easy”), or tensing muscles like a robot then relaxing them like a rag doll. This is an important skill called emotion regulation which can be useful in many aspects of life.

Children who talk often with their parents about climate change are more concerned about climate change but are also better at coping with it. One of the best antidotes to anxiety is action – plan some specific activities that your child can do to help prevent (worse) climate change. (See below for ideas.)



HOW DO I MANAGE MY OWN FEELINGS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

It is likely that you, like your children, have a lot of feelings about climate change - anxiety, anger, sadness, grief, guilt, fear amongst others.

Sometimes we can feel extremely distressed as we learn more, and particularly as we learn about how urgently the world needs to transform in order to prevent the worst problems.

It's important to acknowledge these feelings, recognise that they are reasonable reactions to a problem the size of climate change, and then to find ways of coping with them so that we don't become overwhelmed or paralysed.

- Talk with friends about some of the strong feelings that you have when you think about climate change. Repressing emotions dampens our energy. But when we are able to tell the truth about what we know, see and feel is happening to our world, we often feel transformed, and have increased determination and energy to act.

- Join a group (or start a group if you can't find one that suits) so that you can connect with other concerned people and support each other in addressing the climate crisis.

- Take action on the problems that concern you – this is a very good way of helping ourselves to deal with distress.

- Spend time in nature. This has many benefits like helping you to calm down, reduce stress, feel happier, as well as being very motivating for caring for the planet!

- Practice self-compassion –try to accept your feelings rather than judging or denying them. Try to love yourself through mistakes or failures, apologise when necessary, and practice a range of ways to calm yourself down. (This will also help teach your children an important life skill too).

- Look for more ideas in The Climate Change Empowerment Handbook, available for free at Australian Psychological Society bit.ly/climatechangeempowerment.

- Check out the workshops and resources provided by Psychology for a Safe Climate <https://www.psychologyforasafeclimate.org/>.



HOW DO I TALK TO OTHER PARENTS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

Talking with other parents can help you to brainstorm good ways of addressing climate change with your children. Talking with others who share your concerns about your children's future is also a very good way of dealing with some of the difficult feelings that often come up around climate change. Besides, the more that people hear others talk about the risk of climate change, the more they can see that climate change is a problem that is relevant to them too, and that it is something they can and need to do something about.

- Find ways of bringing up climate change in conversations with other parents, for example, by linking it to something that is happening at school.
- Ask them if they are concerned, and if so why (e.g. perhaps specific concerns about how their children will cope, or sadness about the beautiful places that their children will not be able to experience, or fear about the disruptions that climate change will cause).

- Express your feelings and concerns.
- Talk about the personal responsibility you feel as a parent to stop climate change from getting worse.
- If they express strong feelings, show them that you can see it makes sense to feel that, given the size of the problem.
- Talk about the things you have already done, and your ideas for more things to do.
- Seek their ideas, and ask if they are interested in working with you on projects at school or elsewhere.
- Be ready to share a few basic facts about climate change. There are some good websites that can help with this, which we've listed in the further reading section below.
- Find a common core value that you are both concerned about:
 - Some parents might worry about how their child will cope with a climate-changed world.
 - Some might be worried about the human suffering that it will cause at a global level.
 - Some parents might be distressed at the damage climate change will do to the natural environment, and the loss of favourite places (like the Great Barrier Reef) and the depleted world their children and grandchildren will grow up in.
 - Some might worry that the world won't even be liveable for their children.



WHAT CLIMATE ACTIONS CAN I DO WITH MY CHILDREN?

There are many climate actions that parents can do with their children, or can support their children to do on their own or with other kids. And as well as being good for the planet, taking action on climate change is also an excellent way of dealing with the distressing feelings we might have about the problems we face.

- Listen to children's ideas about how to protect the environment and help them to carry them out if needed. For example, they may want to get involved in planting trees, growing vegetables, recycling and reusing, or they may want to produce pro-environmental posters for public places or family-friendly climate rallies.

- Let your children see the daily things that you do for the environment (e.g., recycling, using public transport, growing a vegie patch, and keeping warm at home using jumpers instead of turning up the heater), and explain to them why you are doing them.

- Help to develop self-efficacy in your children, i.e. their belief that they can make a difference. Help them to notice when their skills help them to succeed in a task (e.g., "You planted that seedling and watered it for weeks, and now look how many pumpkins you have grown!").

- Teach them how to set goals and then work through the steps to get there, then celebrate their successes when they reach them.





WHAT CLIMATE ACTIONS CAN I DO WITH MY CHILDREN?

Show children how working together with others on a problem can make a difference, like the large area that can be planted with new trees when a group of people do it together in a working bee.

- Look for examples of other children who have come up with projects or actions to protect the environment.
- Provide clear expectations of what you want them to do to protect the environment in your daily life, like keeping food out of landfill and riding their bikes to school, and guide them towards action. "We don't drive if we can ride a bike."
- Let them think big! If they've got ideas for a big project, like the two school girls in Bali who began the Bali plastic bag ban, be there to support and encourage them. Help them to work out the steps they need to take to get started.
- See our list of '101 Things You Can Do To Help Address Climate Change'; or the APS' Climate Change Empowerment Handbook, or the Parents' Guide to a Climate Revolution, for more ideas. (See 'Further Reading' below).
- Think of some ideas for action that are also nourishing for the family, like joining family friendly rallies for the environment, or sharing meals with other parents and children as you have an inspiring film night of climate action films.
- Remember that doing something (rather than nothing because you can't do everything) is important.
- Remember too that you don't need to do all these things immediately or all at once. The journey to protect our planet is going to be a long one, and learning to care for the environment is a life-long lesson.

HOW DO I BUILD HOPE FOR MYSELF AND FOR MY CHILDREN?

Maintaining a hopeful outlook is an important way of helping us to cope with the scary reality of the climate crisis at the same time as helping us to keep thinking of things we can do to bring about the best possible outcome. (Psychologists also call this 'meaning-focused coping', which refers to the importance of trying to create meaning and purpose out of a very difficult situation like climate change.)

- Research, think and talk about the concrete, plausible solutions which are already available to drastically reduce carbon emissions, like wind power, solar farms and electric cars (e.g., see Paul Hawken's 2017 book 'Drawdown' for many big picture examples).

- Remember how other big problems around the world have been solved, just by lots of good people getting out there, working together, and demanding it, and share these stories with your children. Some good examples are the abolishment of slavery and apartheid, marriage equality, and women's vote. Look up some good websites that tell these stories, like <http://historyofsocialchange.ca/stories/> and share sites that you find with your friends and family.

- Find good news stories, e.g. about local schools or businesses that have won recent sustainability awards, or the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, or the world's largest TESLA battery that has just been turned on in South Australia to store solar energy.



HOW DO I BUILD HOPE FOR MYSELF AND FOR MY CHILDREN?

Share with your children inspirational quotes, funny cartoons, and inspiring songs which can keep hope alive and help them see the purpose and meaning in efforts to care for the planet despite the enormity of the problem.

- Consider the positive aspects of changing to a low carbon economy, such as lower air pollution resulting in less asthma, lower rates of heart disease from eating less red meat, and more jobs from a booming renewable energy industry!
- Imagine positive images of a future in which climate change has been addressed in a fair and just way, e.g., a world in which public transport and cars are all electrified, neighbourhoods all have bike paths, community gardens, pedestrian-only streets, and thriving local businesses; public housing estates are all eco-communities, with shared veggie gardens, solar energy etc.

- Think about how you've kept hope alive during difficult times in your life.
- Show your children how you developed strong inner strength muscles perhaps by talking things over with good friends, and learning to say encouraging things to yourself like, "Even though things look daunting, I'm going to keep on doing whatever I can to make things better because giving up is not an option that I'm going to take".
- Show them how you keep doing things to tackle climate change even when you're feeling down about the problems.
- Remind yourself and others that it's worth 'going for it' on climate solutions, even though you might be skeptical about solving the climate change problem. There are numerous reasons for why we should: These actions will still contribute to a fairer, cleaner world; It is an act of maturity to keep working to safeguard the possibility of a liveable future, even if we're not sure this will be realised; There's always a difference to be made; It feels good to have a purpose and to work for a better world.



HOW DO I FIND THINGS TO DO THAT CAN REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO PROTECT MY CHILDREN'S FUTURE?

While parents play a hugely important role in raising aware citizens who are able to protect and care for planet in the future, they often also want to do something impactful to change the world for the better right now!

Some climate actions have a bigger impact than others (e.g., see the APS's tipsheet '101 Things You Can Do To Help Address Climate Change'), but the bigger political and organisational decisions matter most, and these are the responsibility of governments, organisations and corporations. As adults, we can look for opportunities to influence decision makers and leaders in a range of different ways:

- Support government policies to limit carbon emissions in line with the climate science.
- If you own shares in companies, use your shareholder power to demand they adopt good climate policies, or divest your shares if they continue to support fossil fuel development.
- Support organisations that are working to get action on climate change at the international level, e.g., by organising fundraisers and donating the profits to these groups, or attending their events, or sharing their messages amongst your own networks.
- Join (or begin!) organisations of parents or grandparents who are taking action on climate change. (E.g., Our kids' climate; 1 million women).

- Talk to, write, email or lobby your local politicians to demand stronger carbon policies.
- Letter box and door-knock in your electorate on climate issues.
- Join rallies and protests for better climate policies.
- Ask your organisations and institutions, like your workplace, school, superannuation scheme, local council, and bank, to take their money out of banks and institutions that fund fossil fuel projects (a useful website to learn more is <https://www.marketforces.org.au/>).



FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Australian Psychological Society Resources:

The Climate Change Empowerment Handbook.

<http://bit.ly/climatechangeempowerment>

Raising children to thrive in a climate changed world.

<http://bit.ly/climatethrive>

101 things you can do to help address climate change.

<http://bit.ly/101climateactions>

Other resources:

Australian Academy of Science. (2015). The science of climate change: Questions and answers.

www.science.org.au/climatechange

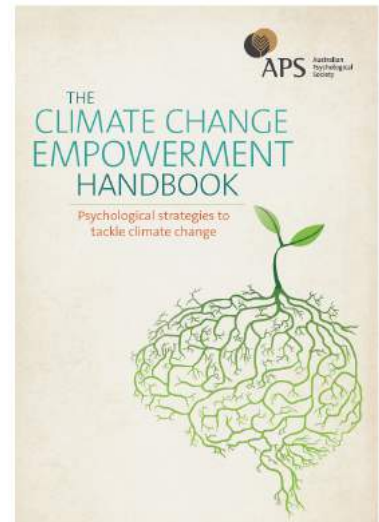
The Climate Council: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/>

Skeptical Science: <https://www.skepticalscience.com/>

Psychology for a Better World.

<http://www.press.auckland.ac.nz/en/browse-books/all-books/books-2018/psychology-for-a-better-world.html>

De Mocker, M (2018). Parents' Guide to a Climate Revolution: 100 Ways to Build a Fossil-Free Future, Raise Empowered Kids, and Still Get a Good Night's Sleep. New World Library, Novato, CA.



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