

If climate change is impacting your desire to have kids, you're not alone

Sara Kiley Watson

This can be one of the most anxiety-inducing questions out there for childless people, often asked at family gatherings by distant relatives or prodding parents. For as long this prying question has been asked, young adults have already been strapped with a whole bunch of anxieties, be it economic, political, job-related, and so on. But today's potential parents have another ever-changing and unprecedented crisis looming over their heads: climate change.

We already know that climate change causes [bounds of anxiety in some of today's youth](#), but a new preprint in [The Lancet](#) also brings up a specific type of anxiety—whether or not to have kids amid some horrific climate change-induced disasters.

“I meet a lot of young girls who ask whether it's still OK to have children,” 25-year-old climate activist Luisa Neubauer [told the Guardian](#). “It's a simple question, yet it tells so much about the climate reality we are living in.”

Why young people may be hesitant to have kids

According to this new research, which was led by psychologists from the University of Bath and still has to go through peer review, 40 percent of the 10,000 young people included in an international survey said they were hesitant to have kids in the future. This could be for one of a few reasons, says Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, an associate professor of environmental studies at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, who was not involved in the new study but has done [research on eco-reproductive concerns](#)—the first of which is “fears or concerns that one's child will not have a good life.”

Considering the state of the planet right now, with increasingly dangerous weather and pollution, this isn't an irrational fear. “People feel rightly scared that we aren't on the right track,” says Kimberly Nicholas, an associate professor of sustainability science at Lund University in Sweden who was not involved in the new study. “Governments aren't upholding their promises to reduce emissions fast enough.” In 2020, Schneider-Mayerson [published a paper](#) that showed that in 600 surveyed people between the ages of 27 to 45, 96 percent were either “very” or “extremely concerned” about how their kids would fare in a future marred by climate change.

[Related: [Kids are suffering from climate anxiety. It's time for adults to do something.](#)]

Another reason, Schneider-Mayerson says, is the carbon footprint of raising a baby, which can be surprisingly significant. Nicholas and colleague Seth Wyne's 2017 paper demonstrated how having

a child in a developed country totals around [58.6 tons of CO2-equivalent emissions per year](#)—the biggest long-term impact a person can make on the Earth’s climate. “Environmentalists have taken that very seriously and want to do everything they can, and so some of them are having smaller families or not having children at all,” Schneider-Mayerson adds.

Not everyone is ditching parenthood

On the flip side of the coin, some adults that care about climate change argue that it’s essential to keep having children, Schneider-Mayerson says. Having kids may give individuals a stronger reason to stay on top of the crisis because they have a personal stake in the future.

“The focus tends to be a lot more on worrying about a child having a hard life or a big carbon footprint,” Schneider-Mayerson says. “But I found that parents were concerned about investment in environmental politics. People say, ‘If I choose not to have kids, I don’t have a reason to care about the future, so I’m going to have kids to maintain this care about the future.’”

Another, slightly cynical reason Schneider-Mayerson mentions is that someone has to raise the next generation of environmentalists. Parents who ignore or [deny the existence of climate change](#) probably aren’t addressing it with their families. For some climate scientists and activists, that’s a little scary considering how many of their peers aren’t having kids, he says.

Of course, there’s no guarantee that your kids will turn out to be warriors for the planet—conservative parents sometimes end up raising radical leftist kids and vice versa, Schneider-Mayerson explains. Having kids in the hopes they’ll end up changing the fate of the planet is perhaps not the best thing to hinge a life-changing decision on.

So, what’s the right decision here?

At the end of the day, climate change can be part of your child-having discussion, but don’t let it be the only one. “I think the personal decision about having kids comes down to values,” Nicholas says.

[Related: [It’s about time adults start rising up against climate change.](#)]

Besides, if you’re stressing about the potential carbon footprint of your offspring, there are ways to keep lowering it even as your family grows: Ditching your car, flying less, and eating meat on limited days of the week are three big changes you can make right now to slash your personal emissions. Some parents, such as [Keya Chatterjee](#), now the Executive Director of the US Climate Action Network, take it even further by installing solar panels on their homes and buying baby products in bulk.

“It’s a human right to decide whether or not you want a child,” Nicholas says. “It’s not a human right to drive an SUV or fly in planes.”

On the other hand, no one should feel forced into being a parent. Wanting to have kids or not is a

deeply personal decision, so follow your gut if you feel strongly one way or the other.

“There are so many factors involved, even for people whose number one concern is climate change,” says Schneider-Mayerson. “There’s still going to be nine or ten other factors for them and things that they aren’t even conscious of.”

Correction: This post originally credited the survey of 600 people between the ages of 27 to 45, 96 percent were either “very” or “extremely concerned” about children in the future of climate change to Kimberly Nicholas, but the study was actually done by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson.