



darebin climate action now
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**Submission to the Senate's
Environment and Communications Legislation Committee
Re: Inquiry into the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and
Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023**

Darebin Climate Action Now (DCAN) is a local not-for-profit organisation of City of Darebin residents. Many of our 4500 supporters are parents and grandparents, and we see our children and grandchildren worrying about their future, while we try cope with our own fears for the future.

Before the 2016 Darebin council elections, DCAN lobbied candidates to commit to strong climate action. Thrillingly, the new Council's first act, on December 5th 2016, was to become the first government body in the world to declare that the world was in a state of climate emergency. (Since then 2339 other jurisdictions, including 18 countries and the EU, have made similar declarations.)

Seven years on, in 2023, DCAN finds it inconceivable, and an outrage to our collective sense of fairness and responsibility to the rising generations, that not only is the Albanese government giving approval to new greenhouse-gas generating fossil fuel projects with intended lifespans of decades, but it is also prepared to argue that it does not have a Duty of Care to consider the consequences of those approvals, and future decisions, on our young people.

The earth is clearly already too hot. In October 2023 scientists reported the clearest possible evidence that if we do not rapidly cease emissions of greenhouse gases we face catastrophe: "Life on planet Earth is under siege. We are now in an uncharted territory. For several decades, scientists have consistently warned of a future marked by extreme climatic conditions because of escalating global temperatures caused by ongoing human activities that release harmful greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. Unfortunately, time is up."¹ Their report showed that the Earth's vital signs have worsened beyond anything humans have yet seen, to the point that "life on the planet is imperilled". Surveys show that most young people are aware of this very real threat to their future, and are deeply worried².

We, as adults, also know that the damage to future generations actually commences well before our youth are even born! We know that prenatal exposure to climate change events can lead to miscarriage and stillbirths, low birth weight, low height for age, and derail normal development in many ways.³

¹<https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advancearticle/doi/10.1093/biosci/biad080/7319571>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)

³ For reviews see Clayton, et al. (2023). Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report 2023. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/10/mental-health-youth-report-2023.pdf>

Exposure to climate-induced extreme weather events has significant impacts on children's mental health⁴. In sudden climate disasters, children and youth can experience a wide range of traumatic events including personal injury, death of a loved one, damage or loss of property and pets, disruption of livelihoods, separation from parents, witnessing injuries or deaths, and forced evacuation or migration. Following such disruptive experiences, children show significant increases in mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, sleep disorders, attachment disorders, regressive behaviours, somatic complaints, cognitive deficits, and learning problems⁵ as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (For example, four months after a flood in Australia, 22 per cent of children scored in the "severe" range for PTSD⁶.) These mental health problems can be extremely persistent: Gibbs et al. (2021)⁷ found evidence of continuing impacts on mental health and wellbeing among many children 10 years after their exposure to bushfires in Victoria. Less research has focused on the psychological impacts of **slower climate changes** such as rising temperatures, drought, poor air quality, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, salinization, land degradation, and the loss of biodiversity on children's mental health, but existing evidence indicates that they can increase the risk of anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, cognitive function impairment, and interpersonal aggression, among other consequences⁸.

Exposure to such extreme climate events is predicted to be very common over the lifetime of today's children, unless urgent action is taken now. Modeling which shows that, with current pledges for climate action, **a child born in 2020 will experience many more climate-related disasters as in their lives as someone born in 1960** (e.g. seven times as many heat-waves, almost 3 times as many droughts and crop failures)⁹. The authors of this study say: "Our results highlight a severe threat to the safety of young generations and call for drastic emission reductions to safeguard their future." Without such drastic action, younger generations will face extraordinary threats to their wellbeing. In this context, it is critical that legislators can be guided in making the right choices for the next generation through the scrutiny required by a Duty of Care Bill.

In the context of the responsibility of governments to consider the welfare of children, it should be noted that the **perceived failure of leaders to adequately address the climate crisis is actually adding to children's worries**. A 2021 survey of 10,000 16-25 year olds from 10 countries, including 1000 young Australians¹⁰, found, "Climate anxiety and dissatisfaction with government responses are widespread in children and young people in countries across the world and impact their daily functioning." Among the Australian sample, 53% were "very" or "extremely" worried about how climate change will affect their future lives, and 63% believed that governments were not taking young people's concerns 'seriously enough' and were not 'doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe'. A similar

⁴ For reviews, see Sanson, et al (2022), *Children and Climate Change* <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/abs/children-and-climate-change/B929244F274C8AB6E7E6B1E76456547D>; Clayton, et al. (2023), as above

⁵ Anderko, Du, & Hauptman (2020). Climate changes reproductive and children's health: A review of risks, exposures, and impacts. *Pediatric Research*, 87(2), 414–419 .

⁶ Poulsen, McDermott, Wallis, & Cobham (2015), *J. Traumatic Stress*, 28: 69-72

⁷ Gibbs, et al. (2021). Child and adolescent psychosocial support programs following natural disasters: A scoping review of emerging evidence. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 23(12), 82.

⁸ Clayton et al. (2023), as above

⁹ Thiery, W., et al.. (2021). Intergenerational inequities in exposure to climate extremes. *Science*, 374(6564), 158–160. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abi7339>

¹⁰ Hickman et al. (2021) [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)

proportion (60%) reported feeling that the government had betrayed them and/or future generations through its inadequate responses to the climate crisis. This sense of betrayal was correlated with their level of distress, which can be regarded as involving moral injury: because governments are seen to be transgressing fundamental moral beliefs about care, compassion, planetary health, and ecological belonging. This perspective was summarised by one 16-year-old: “I think it's different for young people. For us the destruction of the planet is personal”¹⁰. Legislating for a Duty of Care would go some way to rebuilding young people’s trust in government and hope for the future.

While these findings on mental health are incredibly concerning, they are not the end of the matter. Global warming has consequences for **cognitive development and educational outcomes too**. Climate disasters often damage school infrastructure, teachers become unavailable, many families can no longer afford to send their children to school, and children (especially girls) drop out of school or reduce their school attendance¹¹. As already discussed, distress and disruption frequently impact children’s mental health which also affects their academic performance. (This was clear in Victorian students from highly bushfire-affected schools who were more likely to show academic delays 2-4 years later, which were then reflected in lower academic scores 10 years later¹².) Climate impacts on physical health, including injuries and increased likelihood of infectious diseases,¹³ can also prevent children from attending schools regularly. Extreme heat alone reduces the capacity to learn: a study of more than 144 million 15- to 19-year-olds across 12,000 US school districts showed that the rate of learning decreases with an increase in the number of hot school days, especially in schools in lower socioeconomic areas¹⁴.

The book *The Impact of Extreme Weather on School Education*¹⁵ relates specifically to the Australian context. It advises that schooling is already being disrupted by climate in many of the ways described above. The authors suggest that students in northern Australia can expect to be especially badly affected. Even in the unlikely event that all learning spaces and homes, including sleeping areas, are equipped with air-conditioning and have the capacity to pay for it, teachers are unlikely to stay in placements where the climate is hostile to being outside. The resulting transient teaching force will have negative effects on students’ learning.

The climate crisis is also a human rights issue. As noted above, subjecting young people to climate anxiety and moral injury can be ‘regarded as cruel, inhuman, degrading or even torturous.’¹⁷ So, unsurprisingly, **children are now turning to legal action** to address government failure to protect ecosystems, young citizens, and their futures. These actions in pursuit of fairness and a viable future will inevitably increase, until action commensurate with the problem is apparent, or the government at least admits its responsibility to act to protect them. Once again, legislating a Duty of Care would signal this acknowledgement.

¹¹ For review, see Sanson et al. (2022), as above

¹² Gibbs, L., et al. (2019). Delayed disaster impacts on academic performance of primary school children. *Child Development*, 90(4), 1402–1412; Gibbs, et al. (2021), as above

¹³ <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/how-climate-change-is-increasing-infectious-diseases-and-invasive-species/>

¹⁴ Park, R. J., Behrer, A. P., & Goodman, J. (2021). Learning is inhibited by heat exposure, both internationally and within the United States. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5(1), 19-27.

¹⁵ <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/2023/climate-crisis-impacts-young-lives>

According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children have the rights, among others, to safety and protection, health, education and to develop free of interference. As we have demonstrated above, our young Australians' rights in all of these areas are already being infringed upon. If the parliament decides not to recognize that it owes a Duty Of Care to our young people when they consider legislation likely to affect their future climate, it should not be surprised if it is taken to court again and again.

In sum, for the sake of our children, DCAN strongly urges Parliament to support the proposed Duty of Care Bill.

Signed on behalf of Darebin Climate Action Now

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann Sanson', written over a faint, light-colored circular stamp.

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