

Climate justice for the next generation



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Introduction

This free course, *Climate justice for the next generation*, introduces you to a contemporary, emerging issue in Childhood and Youth Studies. You will examine some of the debates around environmental change, its specific impact on children and young people, and the role of children and young people as activists and campaigners within their changing environments.



Figure 1 Climate change protesters near the British Parliament as part of a global day of protest

The idea of climate justice for children and young people is based, in part, on a respect for children's rights so the first section of this course will introduce children's rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The second section will then focus specifically on the impacts that climate change has on children's rights, while the third will examine climate change in terms of inter-generational social justice. In the fourth section you will examine the wider relationships between children and the environment and then in the fifth and final section you will look at the contemporary work being done on 'plastic childhoods'. Specifically in Section 5 you will look at the ways that plastics are entangled, both positively and negatively, in children's lives.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*E232 Exploring childhood and youth*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- recognise the links between children's rights and climate justice
- understand the impacts of climate change on children and young people and recognise the reasons why they are at the forefront of climate change campaigns
- appreciate the relationship between children and the environment
- understand the idea of 'plastic childhoods' and look at the ways that plastics are entangled in children's lives.

1 Children and young people's rights

The idea that children have rights is a central proposition of Childhood and Youth Studies and is based on almost a century of international legislation.

In 1924, the first ever international children's rights treaty, The Declaration of Geneva, was adopted by the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations). It was written by the founder of the Save the Children Fund, Eglantyne Jebb, who argued that children should be protected not only out of charity but should be fed, clothed and sheltered as a right.



Figure 2 Eglantyne Jebb (1876 -1928), founder of the Save the Children Fund (1918) and initiator of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

In five points, the Declaration set out the special rights that all children had because of their age and perceived vulnerabilities, as well as the responsibilities that all adults had in fulfilling those rights (Box 1) .

Box 1 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924)

1. The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually.
2. The child that is hungry must be fed, the child that is sick must be nursed, the child that is backward must be helped, the delinquent child must be reclaimed, and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succoured.
3. The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress.

4. The child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation.
5. The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of its fellow men.

(University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, no date)

Since the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1924, there have been various international conventions, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which have clauses that invoke special protection for children. The most significant children's rights treaty, however, is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which came into force in 1989. You will look at this next.

1.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UNCRC is the most important international children's rights convention and is central to understanding contemporary childhoods. Children's rights are part of broader human rights legislation but the UNCRC emphasises that as well as the same rights all children have as human beings, they have additional rights to special protections and provisions because of their age and developing capabilities.

To help introduce the UNCRC, watch the video below which provides a useful summary of the rights all children are entitled to.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1



Now complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

Allow 15 minutes

Part 1

Which of the following rights do children have? Check your answers as you go along. The UNCRC asserts children's right to:

- Be free from hunger
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False
- Be happy
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False

Discussion

You will look in more detail as to why the answer to this question is no in Part 2 of this activity.

- Be protected from neglect and abuse
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False
- Be loved by their parents
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False

Discussion

You will look in more detail as to why the answer to this question is no in Part 2 of this activity.

- Health and education
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False
- An identity
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False
- Share their views, access information and make decisions that affect their lives
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False
- Have friends
 - ☐ True
 - ☐ False

Discussion

You will look in more detail as to why the answer to this question is no in Part 2 of this activity.

- A childhood
 - True
 - False

Discussion

You will look in more detail as to why the answer to this question is no in Part 2 of this activity.

Part 2

Now you have completed Part 1 of this activity, write a sentence on why you think the UNCRC does not set out unequivocally children's right to be happy.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The UNCRC is an official document that sets out legally enforceable standards. It is important to distinguish this set of legal standards with the sometimes loose way that the phrase 'children's rights' is used to refer, for instance, to a child's 'right to a childhood' or to loving parents.

There is an important difference between 'rights' and 'wants' and it is essential to differentiate between the desire for children's well-being and the legal responsibility to enforce this. It is possible to say, for example, that a child has a right to the best possible standard of living given the circumstances they live in, but it is not meaningful to say a child has a right to a happy childhood, no matter how desirable this might be. As lawyer Jack Donnelly (2003, pp. 10–11) argues:

We do not have human rights to all things that are good, or even all *important* good things. For example, we are not entitled – do not have (human) rights – to love, charity or compassion. Parents who abuse the trust of children wreak havoc with millions of lives every day. We do not, however, have a human right to loving, supportive parents. In fact, to recognize such a right would transform family relations in ways that many people would find unappealing or even destructive.

The fundamental principle behind the UNCRC is stated in Article 3, which reads:

In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration

(Unicef, no date)

However, when drafting the Convention its authors were very careful not to set up rights to something that is legally meaningless. The preamble to the UNCRC states an ideal and recognises that in a perfect world all children would grow up in 'an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' but that this is not, and never can be, a legally

enforceable standard and no government or organisation can ensure that children are happy.

Although it is desirable to want children to be happy, have good friends and be loved by their parents, there is no right to any of these things. Next you'll look at the principles behind the UNCRC in more detail.

1.2 The 3Ps of children's rights



Figure 3 Children have the right to be heard

The UNCRC contains 54 articles which detail children's rights to:

- **provision** (for basic needs such as food and housing);
- **protection** (from abuse, from degrading punishment or arrest without a proper judicial process); and
- **participation** (to express their views on all matters that affect them and have those views taken seriously).

In the next activity you will read a simplified version of the UNCRC.

Activity 2

Allow 30 minutes

First read a [simplified version of the UNCRC](#) (open the link in a new tab or window by holding down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac)). Then, when you have read it through, fill in the gaps in the table below. To do this you should identify which article of the UNCRC corresponds to which right, before deciding the category – provision, protection or participation – it refers to. The first row is filled in for you as an example.

Table 1 The 3 Ps in the UNCRC

Article	Right	Category
24	Health care	Provision
<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	Play	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
28	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
32	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	Protection

<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Right to express views and have them taken seriously	Participation
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Right to freedom of religion	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
19	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Protection
34	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
13	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Discussion

Table 1 The 3 Ps in the UNCRC (completed)

Article	Right	Category
24	Health care	Provision
31	Play	Provision
28	Education	Provision
32	Protection from economic exploitation	Protection
12	Right to express views and have them taken seriously	Participation
14	Right to freedom of religion	Participation
19	Protection from abuse and neglect	Protection
34	Protection from sexual exploitation	Protection
13	Right to information	Participation

The UNCRC is the most ratified convention in the history of the United Nations, ratified by every country in the world except the USA.

Since its adoption, there have also been supplementary conventions and protocols adopted which include provision for especially vulnerable children. These include the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002) and The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2002).

It is important to remember, however, that the UNCRC is not a blue-print of practical policy but a set of guiding principles of what children need to ensure their best interests. Unfortunately, despite the almost universal adoption of children's rights, many children and young people throughout the world continue to suffer. Today, children and young people are still subject to danger from malnutrition and starvation, inadequate water, lack of access to health care, slavery, prostitution, pornography, torture, racism, sexism, and armed conflicts. Poverty and inequality are all still prevalent across the globe and make the implementation of children's rights extremely hard. Globally 17,000 children still die every day and 61,000 million children are out of school and not receiving an education. Social justice for children, and for poorer children in particular, is still a very long way off – whatever the legislation in place – and intergenerational inequalities intersect with discrimination and prejudice to compound the infringements of children's rights worldwide. Such infringements, as the next section will argue, are further worsened by environmental damage, making climate change not only an environmental calamity but also a generational crisis. Climate change is hitting the youngest and most vulnerable hardest and further infringes the already tentative rights of many children and young people.

2 Climate change and children's rights

Despite the near universal ratification of the UNCRC, children's rights remain under threat. One recent area of concern for both policy makers and academics is the way that contemporary problems such as climate change have disproportionate impacts on children – particularly those who are poor or already vulnerable. The ways in which climate change can violate children's rights will be the focus of this section.

In 2019, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) claimed that unless the world's industrialised nations acted to limit global warming to 1.5°C by 2030 there would be catastrophic and irreversible climate change. There is strong evidence to suggest that a failure to tackle climate change will lead to unprecedented environmental and social catastrophes, with an increase in extreme weather, flooding, droughts and heat waves, damage to ecosystems in the Amazon rainforest and Polar Regions, and rising sea levels. The climate crisis has also led to social unrest – 2019 was characterised by mass protests in major cities throughout the world calling on governments to act before it is too late.



Figure 4 Children are being used as symbols of the future

Children and young people have been at the forefront of many campaigns and movements against climate change and environmental damage for several reasons. They have been used as symbols of the future and representatives of the next generation, as well as the inheritors of the problems caused by decisions made before they were born.

In 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in France to sign the Paris Agreement. As he came up to sign the agreement he carried his young granddaughter to the podium to remind the audience of the importance of the treaty to future generations. While the symbolism of this was a little obvious (*The Daily Mail* responded, 'OK, Mr. Kerry, We Get It —It's for the Children', quoted in Cocco-Klein and Mauger, 2018, p. 90), it underlined the point that it is today's children who will bear the brunt of the effects of climate change in the future. They will be living with the impacts of decisions made decades ago and will be living in a world with vastly different weather, coastlines and environments than those of today. Their rights are being violated by climate change in myriad ways – these will be examined in the next section.

2.1 How are children's rights affected by climate change?

Increasingly, climate change is being understood as an infringement of children's rights because children are disproportionately affected by climate change. Climate change violates their rights under the UNCRC and impacts them both now and in their future lives.



Figure 5 Children are being disproportionately affected by climate change

Looking at climate change in this way shifts the emphasis away from technological solutions to environmental problems and instead looks at climate change in terms of the impacts it has on children. In Activity 3 you will explore how children's rights are being violated as a result of climate change.

Activity 3

Allow 15 minutes

Use the drop-down options to complete the sentences below by matching the correct UNCRC article number with the wording extracted from the full article. You should use the [simplified version of the UNCRC](#) to help (open the link in a new tab or window by holding down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac)).

Interactive content is not available in this format.

There are many other ways in which children's rights are being violated through climate change. For example, climate change increases food insecurity; for the millions of children who rely on seafood as their main source of protein (and family income), warmer or more acidic waters are destroying food chains and make having a balanced diet harder. Moreover, weather extremes such as long term drought are leading to reservoirs drying up and glaciers melting, thereby endangering clean drinking water supplies. Conversely increased rain is causing flooding and disrupting farming, as well as having less obvious consequences, such as lowering indoor air quality with mould and fungi damaging indoor atmospheres (Osterloff, 2020).

These changes affect everyone but they are compounded by the pre-existing vulnerability of many children, in particular those that are living in poverty. For example, children in poverty have worse health than their wealthier counterparts and are more susceptible to malnutrition and food scarcity. They live on the worst land, which is less able to withstand the impacts of high winds, flooding and soil erosion, particularly as their homes are likely to be flimsier and their communities more physically and psychologically fragile. While these problems affect both adults and children, children's physical and social vulnerability

and dependence on adults means that poor children's rights are at greatest risk in the face of climate change.

Acknowledging these inequalities means looking at climate change as a problem of social injustice, as well as ecological degradation. Increasingly, young activists are framing climate change in terms of social justice and intergenerational equality and this will be the focus of the next section.

3 Climate justice for the next generation

Climate change is something that affects different people in different ways. Those living in countries close to sea level, for example, will be affected differently to those in cities. It is estimated that approximately 190 million people currently live in areas that are expected to be under high tide levels by 2100. This will cause massive displacements of populations, and nations like Tuvalu or the Maldives could disappear altogether (Osterloff, 2020). For those in cities, temperature change could make living there unbearable and those who are poor and cannot afford air conditioning, or who live in substandard or poorly ventilated houses, will suffer health problems from the heat.

Climate change does not affect everyone equally therefore and, as suggested in the previous section, it both illuminates and increases inequality and injustice. For this reason, many protestors prefer not to talk about the need to combat climate change but about the need to ensure **climate justice**. In using this term, activists frame global warming and climate change in terms of human rights and emphasise the critical point that those who are least responsible for climate change – including children – are the ones who suffer its most significant consequences. In order to examine the ideas of social justice and intergenerational inequality more fully, firstly it is important to define these terms.

According to Mary Robinson, the Former Irish president, the notion of climate justice:

insists on a shift from a discourse on greenhouse gases and melting ice caps into a civil rights movement with the people and communities most vulnerable to climate impacts at its heart. Now, thanks to the recent marches, strikes and protests by hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren, we have begun to understand the intergenerational injustice of climate change.

(Quoted in United Nations, 2019)

Robinson has also stressed the importance of intergenerational partnerships where young people are seen as ‘means of implementation’ and ‘creators of opportunities’ and not just beneficiaries.



Figure 6 Young climate change protesters in Prague, Czech Republic, November 2019

Such a shift in thinking has led to children and young people becoming activists and political leaders. No longer prepared to be only passive or mute symbols of the future, children and young people are now campaigning for climate justice for their own and future generations. Rather than waiting passively for adults to ensure their rights to protection and provision, children and young people are taking their rights to participation seriously (discussed in Section 1) and demanding to be included in and consulted about decisions which affect them.

High profile campaigners such as Alexandria Villaseñor in the USA or Aditya Mukarji in India have become important and listened-to campaigners urging governments to take the crisis seriously, organising school strikes and starting campaigns to limit plastic waste (Unigwe, 2019).

Most famous of all campaigners is Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. In 2019, the then 16-year-old addressed the climate summit at the United Nations in New York and demanded that climate change be seen specifically as a children's problem and as an infringement of their rights. She denounced the leaders in the room:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! ...You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

(Thunberg, 2019)



Figure 7 Climate activist Greta Thunberg demonstrating against climate change in Stockholm

A few hours after making this speech, Thunberg and 14 other young activists attempted to persuade the United Nations to classify the climate crisis as a children's rights crisis. They did this by filing a lawsuit suing five of the world's major carbon polluters – Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey – for failing to uphold their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3.1 Are young people particularly environmentally conscious?

The high profile of campaigners such as Greta Thunberg has positioned children and young people at the forefront of climate change activism. The extensive coverage they are being given in the media has led many to ask whether this generation of young are particularly environmentally conscious. You will consider this question in the next activity.

Activity 4

Allow 15 minutes

In the following audio you will hear an interview between Heather Montgomery of the Open University and Peter Kraftl who is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Birmingham. Peter has worked extensively on children and the environment. In this interview he discusses the question of whether young people are particularly environmentally conscious and how this might differ cross-culturally.



Figure 8 Professor Peter Kraftl, Birmingham University

Listen to the interview, then, once you have finished, answer the questions below.

Audio content is not available in this format.

1. Today's young people are the first generation to realise the catastrophic effects of environmental damage.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

2. Environmental issues have been a social concern for several decades.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

3. Young people's activism around climate change is more visible than before.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

4. Children in Brazil are more interested in debates around generational inequalities than their Western counterparts.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

5. Children in Brazil have a really rich and detailed understanding of the environment, but they learn about the environment in different ways and express that environmental knowledge in terms of questions of social justice and class related inequalities.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

6. Children in the West suffer from the impacts of climate change much more than those elsewhere.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

7. Many young climate activists tend to be white and privileged and some have expressed concerns that this might obscure the concerns and actions of poorer children outside the West

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

While Peter Kraftl discusses the prominence of this generation in contemporary debates, he is cautious about claiming this as an entirely new phenomenon and argues that young people have always been activists and campaigned alongside other, older people. However, he does see today's protestors as particularly visible and acknowledges that they have been at the forefront of many recent climate protests, highlighting the inter-generational aspects of the climate change debate.

The following section will further draw on Peter's research interests, which focus more broadly on children's relationship with the environment

4 Changing environments

It is evident from all the reasons discussed in this course so far that children's environments are changing and that, for some children, such changes are disastrous and will have extremely damaging consequences on their lives. Geographers have long looked at the interrelationships between people and their environments and how they change in relation to each other. More recently, some human geographers have started to focus specifically on childhood. 'Children's geographies' is a fast growing and vibrant sub-field of geography and at the forefront of thinking in this new field is Professor Peter Kraftl from Birmingham University, who you came across in the previous section.

In the sections that follow you will read extracts from a chapter written by Peter Kraftl. The chapter, which accompanies the Open University module E232 *Exploring Childhood and Youth*, has been specially commissioned by The Open University and examines how children have responded to their changing environments, including climate change, and how this differs in different places.



Figure 9 Climate change is having a profound effect on the environment

4.1 Children and environmental connectedness

Children's relationship with the environment is complex. In his work, Kraftl discusses this relationship and specifically looks at how children's experiences of environmental change will be very different depending on their physical location and environmental circumstances. To explore this idea in more detail in the activity that follows you will read the example of Murilo, a Brazilian boy, whose daily life is characterised by adaptation to environmental change. His life is compared to children in the West and to adults' fears about children losing their connections to nature.



Figure 10 How children experience environmental change depends on their circumstances

Activity 5

Allow 30 minutes

Read [Changing environments - Taubaté, São Paulo State, Brazil](#), then answer the following two questions.

1. Which of the following did Murilo learn from his experiments? Fill in the blanks using the drop down menus.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

2. Have children lost their connectedness with nature? Which of the following are seen as evidence that children in the Global North have lost their 'connectedness' with 'nature'? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Children have been rendered less knowledgeable about their (local) environment
- ☐ Children no longer know the sources of their food
- ☐ Children are more likely to take part in school strikes
- ☐ Children are becoming more vulnerable to physiological and psychological illnesses

In this reading Peter Kraftl is asking you to look more broadly at the relationship between children and the environment. Campaigns and school strikes against climate change – while receiving a great deal of attention in the Western media – are, as you have read, a small part of the whole. Through examples of children such as Murilo, you can see how nuanced children's relationships with the environment are and the very different ways in which they react to climate change depending on where and in what circumstances they live in.

4.2 The concept of nexus

The concept of the nexus and its use in contemporary social science is something Kraftl uses to explore children's experiences of environmental change in different places. By nexus, Kraftl means the relationships and interconnectedness between things and people. In the reading that follows in Activity 6 he uses the word nexus to emphasise the interconnectedness of everything.

Activity 6

Allow 30 minutes

Read [Changing environments - Resources, interconnectedness and nexus thinking](#) by Kraftl, then answer the following two questions.

1. In less than 50 words, write a sentence on the value of 'nexus' thinking.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Nexus thinking allows scholars to understand complex, mutual and interdependent systems, as well as the inter-connections between resource sectors, such as water, energy and food that had previously been investigated separately.

2. Complete the following sentence in your own words:

A nexus framework offers an opportunity to...

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A nexus framework offers an opportunity to look at how different environmental challenges *matter* to children, in any time and place.

The concept of nexus may seem an unnecessarily complex one which academics use to describe the commonplace. However, its use emphasises the complexity and interrelatedness of different aspects of children's lives. It highlights how children are connected to the whole ecosystem and to wider networks of food production, water distribution or fuel consumption.

4.3 Taking environmental action

In Section 3 you looked at the different forms of action taken by children campaigning for climate justice, such as the wave of school strikes that affected many countries in 2019. In this section, by drawing on the work of Kraftl once more, you will consider why young people have had such an impact in these campaigns and what they have brought to contemporary debates.

Activity 7

Allow 30 minutes

Read [Changing environments - Taking environmental action](#), then answer the following two questions.

1. In 2019 there were a series of school strikes. What were they and what did they seek to achieve?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The school strikes were weekly protests led by school children against climate change. They sought to pressure the government into acting against further climate damage.

2. List at least three reasons why the climate strikes offer a notable example of youth action.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Answers could include:

- They are on a global scale
- They have made effective use of social media to mobilise and visualise the collective protest.
- They have particular emotional and political overtones, which challenges the notion of children as vulnerable or innocent.
- They have been highly effective, challenging and even threatening adult authority.

Peter Krafft has warned against over-romanticising children's actions and viewing this generation as the first to care about the environment. Nevertheless, there is something unique about the visibility and action of today's young people.

5 Plastic childhoods

While climate change – its impact on the earth's temperature and the subsequent consequences of that – has been the focus of protests by young activists such as Greta Thunberg, other young people have focused their protests and campaigns on other forms of environmental damage.

An obvious example of environmental damage is the use of single-use plastics by richer countries of the world. Images of marine life swallowing and choking on plastics have been hugely influential and have come to symbolise the damage done to the ocean environment by human carelessness and poor stewardship of the natural world. These have drawn significant responses from young people. In India, for example, 14-year-old student Aditya Mukarji launched a campaign against plastic straws after seeing a video of two vets trying to remove a plastic straw from a turtle's nose. Since 2018 when he first started to campaign, Aditya has helped replace more than 500,000 plastic straws in restaurants and hotels.

In the next activity you will explore the impact of plastics on children's lives in more detail.



Figure 11 Young environmental activists are also campaigning to reduce the use of single-use plastics.

Activity 8

Allow 15 minutes

Earlier in this course you heard Peter Kraftl talk about children and young people's environmental activism. In the audio that follows you will hear him talk about the research he carried out between 2018 and 2020 as a Leverhulme Research Fellowship on a project called 'Plastic childhoods'.

This phrase 'plastic childhoods' immediately conjures up images of damage and waste but in his research Kraftl focuses on the wider, and more nuanced, impacts of plastics on children's lives. He focuses on the different ways in which plastics appear, travel through and disappear in children's lives, and also considers the ways in which plastics evade human control and how they appear in the environment at many different scales from the global right down to the microscopic and the nanoscopic.

In his research, Kraftl argues that while children often express hostility towards plastic waste and want to see an end to it, they also acknowledge plastics can be useful and necessary and it is too simplistic to ban all plastics from children's lives. He emphasises the importance of listening to children's views and allowing them to develop their own ideas about how they wish to use plastics

Listen to the audio then answer the question that follows.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Which of the following statements is not true?

- ☐ Plastics can be used both negatively and positively in children's lives
- ☐ The project used many different methods, including biological sampling and social media
- ☐ Plastics pose no risk to children
- ☐ Plastics, and their impacts on the environment, are a source of concern to many children.

While many of us might have a rather simplistic reaction to the idea of plastic childhoods – and think about the large amount of plastic waste we accumulated as children or our children accumulate – Kraftl's work goes beyond this. He looks at the ways 'micro' plastics enter children's bodies as well as how the 'macro' plastic waste in the ocean affects children. His work draws on human geography, anthropology and sociology, and also on children's own views and ideas and the ways they differentiate between good and bad plastic.

5.1 Thinking materially: children, nonhumans and Common Worlds

You will now look at a different – and possibly counter-intuitive – way of understanding contemporary childhoods. Kraftl, in the final section of his chapter, which forms the reading for Activity 9, suggests the need to 'decentre' childhood in order to understand it better. Rather than focus directly on childhood as Childhood and Youth Studies has always tried to, it may be better, he argues, to look at the relationships and interconnectedness of things around children.

Kraftl bases this idea on the example of a totem pole made out of plastic waste by some of the young people he has worked with. He discusses how the children and young people used plastic to transform their ideas about waste and turn rubbish into art. Using this example, Kraftl discusses how children can transform plastic and use it to shape their thinking. In doing so he shows how children's thinking can be critical, nuanced and considered.

Activity 9

Allow 30 minutes

Read [Changing environments - Thinking materially: children, non-humans and Common Worlds](#), then answer the following three questions.

1. Fill in the following words from the drop down menus.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

2. What was the purpose of the totem poles Kraftl talks about? Was it to:

- ☐ Unsettle the students and make them think differently about plastics?
- ☐ Function as an anti-litter campaign?
- ☐ Raise money for charity by buying things in charity shops?

- Shame the children's parents into buying fewer plastic toys?

3. How did making the totem pole challenge students' thinking?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

- It acknowledged the lives of the plastics and made students think about where they had come from and why.
- It transformed waste into something with value.
- It asked students to think of both the positives and negatives of using plastics.

The Plastic childhoods project examines the many different ways in which plastics appear, travel through and also disappear in children's lives. It also acknowledges how concerned children are about plastics but how there is a need for a more nuanced understanding about them – not all plastics are 'bad', some are useful and many can be transformed by being recycled into art or other forms.

The value of Kraftl's work, and of Childhood and Youth studies more generally, is that it shows the nuances of young people's thinking, their ability to engage critically with global problems and take action on behalf of their generation and future generations.

Children and young people are not only demanding an end to current environmental policies but are demanding justice: justice for themselves and future generations, justice for the non-humans creatures in the sea and in the forests and a fairer redistribution of the risks and benefits inherent in the global economic system.

6 End-of-course quiz

Now you have completed this course on *Climate justice for the next generation*, have a go at the end-of-course quiz to test your knowledge.

End-of-course quiz

Allow 30 minutes

1. UNCRC stands for:

- ☐ Universal Notions of Child Rescue and Care
- ☐ Unlimited National Concern for Rescued Children
- ☐ Unified National Council on Remembering Childhood
- ☐ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

2. The UNCRC has been ratified by every country in the world except one. Which one is it ?

- ☐ Somalia
- ☐ USA
- ☐ UK
- ☐ Norway

3.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

4. The fundamental principle behind the UNCRC is that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. True or false?

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

5. Climate change is a children's rights crisis because:

- ☐ It only concerns children and adults are unaffected
- ☐ Climate justice affects adults and climate change affects children
- ☐ It violates children's rights under the UNCRC
- ☐ Children are more naturally environmentally sensitive.

6. Which of the following are quotes from Greta Thunberg? Tick all that apply.

- ☐ 'If I have children or grandchildren, maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you, the people who were around back in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act.'
- ☐ 'I will never leave Sweden again until the climate change emergency is over.'
- ☐ 'You are failing us. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.'
- ☐ 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.'

- ☐ 'We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.'
- ☐ 'The world is doomed.'

7. Tick all that apply.

Nexus is:

- ☐ An oil company
- ☐ A way of understanding the interconnectedness of children and the environment
- ☐ An NGO dedicated to reversing climate change
- ☐ A way of understanding the different lenses researchers use to look at children and the environment.

8. Answer True or False to the following statements.

Children and young people generally aren't very interested in the role of plastics in their lives.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Bio sampling of young people's breath and urine revealed high levels of plastics in their bodies.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Bio sampling of young people's breath and urine revealed small amounts of titanium and aluminium levels in their bodies.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Chemicals in children's bodies may have come from local industries but they are also found in products directly targeted at children including sunscreen.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Conclusion

In this course you have considered children's relationship to the environment and climate change by focusing on the issue of climate justice and children's rights in this and future generations.



Figure 12 Children's futures are threatened by pollution

You began by discussing the importance of children's rights in understanding contemporary childhoods and looked in detail at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). You then went on to look at the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children in general and poor children in particular, before considering why children and young people have been at the forefront of climate change campaigns. In Section 4, you turned to the work of Peter Kraftl in order to discuss the relationship and interconnectedness of children and the environment. Finally this course looked at an emerging issue in childhood studies – the role of plastics in children's lives and how they understand and respond to the changes that plastics bring.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E232 Exploring childhood and youth](#).

If you've enjoyed this OpenLearn free course, you might also like to study the courses below:

- [Children's experiences with digital technologies](#)
- [Childhood in crisis](#)
- [Childhood in the digital age](#)
- [Children's rights](#)

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Further reading

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Acknowledgements

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Video

Video 1: Courtesy of Impact(Ed) International

Text

Activity 2: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/uncrc-child-friendly-version1.pdf>, Save The Children.

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