

EcoA Research Nutshell

Public opinion on climate among parents

Key details

Key terms: parents, parental engagement on climate change, behaviors, knowledge, concerns

Demographic profile: Canadian parents of children 18 and under

Sources: EcoAnalytics' [2022 Climate of Change national survey \(CoC 2022\)](#), [2023 CA-MAP National Segmentation Survey \(CA-MAP 2023\)](#), [Canadians perspectives on climate change and education \(Learning for a Sustainable Future/Leger, 2022\)](#), [Ipsos polling on parental concerns \(commissioned by Save the Children, 2023\)](#), [A scoping review of the green parenthood effect on environmental and climate engagement \(Trish Shrum, et. al, 2023\)](#) and [When global problems come home: Engagement with climate change within the intersecting affective spaces of parenting and activism \(Howard, Lisa 2022\)](#).

Parents are a large and potentially powerful cohort for the climate movement, if effectively mobilized in the protection of their children's future. However, despite the seemingly direct link to the health and safety of their children's future, there are still significant barriers keeping many parents away from this type of advocacy for their children. This *Nutshell* draws from recent EcoA, Ipsos and Leger polling that highlights Canadian parents' beliefs, concerns, behaviour, and knowledge, and offers some insights for opportunities to leverage parenthood for greater environmental engagement.

Academic research on parents and climate action is a relatively new area of study, but recent articles shed some light on the psychological mechanisms at play during this important time and how these may help or hinder a parent's views on climate engagement and the protection of their children's future (beliefs about responsibility, legacy, etc.) (Shrum, Trisha, et. al, 2023). However as this research, as well as EcoA's [CA-MAP 2023 National Segmentation Survey](#) shows, differences in social and political values are generally stronger predictors of climate engagement than parental status. A summary of the five different segments, as defined in the CA-MAP 2023 study, along with each segment's values and worldviews and how to engage them, can be [found here](#).

Other research on parents already engaged in climate activism provides some clues to broader engagement, revealing the importance of hope, solidarity and personal relationships in overcoming the parental lens of risk, fear and guilt (Howard, Lisa, 2022).

Health and cost of living are top concerns, but global instability looms large

When asked about the most important issues today in the fall of 2023, 87% of parents list healthcare as *extremely or very important*, followed by inflation and cost of living (83%) and access to affordable housing (69%). Only 56% rate climate change as important. These figures are similar for non-parents (CA-MAP 2023). Parents are struggling financially, with almost half feeling stress from debt they carry (47%) and finding it hard to meet monthly expenses (44%). Both of these indicators are almost 10 percentage points higher than for those who are non-parents (CA-MAP 2023).

When asked about their concerns for the future and what keeps Canadian parents up at night, in addition to finances (63%) and personal family issues (55%), global instability (44%), growing conflicts (42%) and extreme weather (34%) also register, all up significantly from last year (Save the Children, 2023). Misinformation and hate also tops the list of Canadian parents' perceived threats to society (CA-MAP 2023).

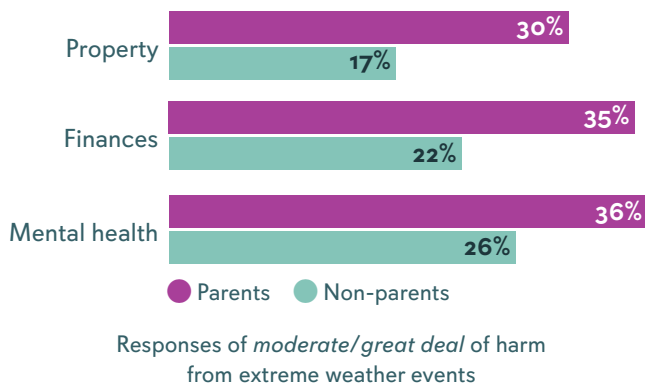
On concern specifically about climate change, 38% are *somewhat concerned* and 30% are *very concerned* (CA-MAP 2023) compared to 37% and 37% of non-parents who are *somewhat concerned* and *very concerned*.

But parents are worried about climate change

Almost 60% of parents report feeling ashamed at what they are leaving behind for the future generations, angry at how people have treated the environment and scared about the future of the planet. And many (40%) often (more than a few times a week) feel anxious about their personal responsibility to help address climate change, 38% feel anxious about the impact of their personal behaviour on climate change, and 35% feel afraid of climate change (CoC 2022).

Parents are impacted by extreme weather

Parents report higher than average levels of harm caused by extreme weather events (CoC 2022):



And the majority of parents are not well prepared: only 42% of parents reported having an emergency kit with supplies for 72 hours, slightly lower than non-parents (CoC 2022).

...but most don't feel at risk of harm

Only 47% of parents and 52% of non-parents and 60% of youth aged 18–24 think that climate change will harm them a *great deal or moderate amount*. And while 52% think climate change will harm future generations, this belief is less common than among non-parents (62%) and youth (66%) (CA-MAP 2023).

A majority of parents also don't believe that climate change is already harming Canadians. Just 28% think it is harming Canadians now, while 20% think it will harm them in 10 years and 33% in 25 years or more (CoC 2022).

Parents' knowledge has room to grow

No less than 75% of parents do understand that climate change plays at least some role in extreme weather (CoC 2022). However, like most Canadians, they have high levels of uncertainty around climate change and its solutions and many have a hard time seeing through misinformation. This level of uncertainty is illustrated in the two graphics below (CoC 2022): the first graphic shows true statements and second, false statements.

Rising oil and gas prices is a major reason for the rise in cost of living over the past year



Oil companies have hidden evidence of human-caused climate change since the 1970s



Canadian doctors believe climate change is a public health emergency



Renewable energy prices are more stable and predictable than are prices for oil and gas



We can continue to expand oil and gas production and reach our net zero emissions targets



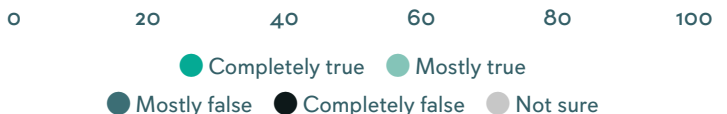
You cannot power an industrial economy with renewable energy alone



Solar panels emit more greenhouse gases during manufacturing than they end up saving



If we protect more land through conservation programs, the affordability crisis in housing will get worse



Learning for a Sustainable Future surveyed parents, educators, students and the general public on climate knowledge and behaviours in 2019 and 2022. Parental levels of knowledge in 2022 improved over the 2019 survey, but were still behind that of educators, the general public and even slightly behind

students. Only 50% of parents correctly identified the cause of climate change, compared to 65% of educators, and 54% of students and 54% of the general population. About 53% of parents knew that the oil and gas and transportation sectors were the largest emitters and 76% knew that to ensure our climate stays within a tolerable range we need to lower emissions; but only 49% felt they were well informed regarding climate change and its solutions (LSF 2022).

Special messengers may be needed to build parents' climate knowledge

As messengers of climate information, parents trust scientists significantly more than any other source (67%). Traditional (print and broadcast) media enjoy much less trust (30%), followed by NGOs (24%) and the federal government (24%), with friends and family even less trusted (19%) (LSF 2022). It is worth noting, though, when asked about *who they trust to do the right thing*, in EcoA's 2023 CA-MAP National Segmentation Survey, 92% of parents said they *strongly* or *somewhat trust* friends and family, while 87% put their trust in doctors and 79% in scientists, 55% in environmental groups and 48% in the federal government (CA-MAP 2023).

Few parents are engaging in climate behaviour, but many indicate they would

No less than 72% of parents say they have taken steps to decrease their carbon emissions (LSF 2022), however, only 11% talk about climate change often, while 36% talk about it occasionally. Only 10% have donated to an environmental cause, 5% have attended a rally, and 32% have made purchases with environmental benefits in mind. These numbers are similar to the national average (CA-MAP 2023).

While these numbers seem low, there is potential for more engagement. Almost 40% say they were *likely* or *very likely* to vote for a politician with strong environmental policies (only 4% said they were already doing this). About 39% were *likely* or *very likely* to cut down on their car travel (10% were already doing this) and 31% were *likely* or *very likely* to eat a more plant-based diet (6% were already doing this) (CoC 2022). Almost 40% would *definitely* or *probably* join a campaign urging their provincial government to do more about climate change (CA-MAP 2023). Only

16% agreed that the government was doing a good job of addressing climate change (LSF 2022).

In addition to time constraints, parents face other physical and psychological barriers to climate engagement

When asked about barriers to climate engagement parents most commonly stated concerns around the economy suffering if we move away from fossil fuels, Canada being too small of a country to make a difference, technology saving us and a desire to enjoy life rather than worry about climate change (CA-MAP 2023). Like many other Canadians, parents remain skeptical, with 31% agreeing that while humans *could* reduce climate change, most people aren't willing to change their behaviors so we *won't* reduce climate change. Only 11% agree that humans *can* and *will* reduce climate change, while 46% are uncertain whether we will do what is needed (LSF 2022).

When it comes to emissions, parents are somewhat reluctant to fully blame fossil fuels companies

Almost half of parents agree that the oil and gas sector benefits their community, while 34% says it neither benefits nor hurts their community. Only 39% think that companies that burn, transport and produce fossil fuels play a big role in climate change, while 37% think they play some role; 31% think the government being slow to enact laws and 20% think individuals play a big role in causing climate change.

As for climate solutions, parents seem unsure, though, perhaps, cautiously optimistic

When asked about government spending priorities, 30% of parents think the government should prioritize investment in renewable energy, and 24% in fossil fuels, while 33% are neutral. Canadians without children are about five percentage points more supportive of renewables and less supportive of fossil fuels. Fewer parents than non-parents support a carbon tax (43% vs 50%) or an emissions cap (45% vs 52%). However parents do seem more optimistic about the efficacy and impact of a transition to 100% renewable energy sources by 2035. Almost half agree that an energy

transition will help the economy, 16% don't think it will have an impact on the economy and 15% are unsure. About 36% think the energy transition is *likely* or *very likely* to succeed, 31% are neutral. As well, 37% of parents think the energy transition will improve affordability, while 36% think it will have no impact (CoC 2022). These reveal parents to be more optimistic about the future than non-parents, by several points on these questions.

Takeaways

As shown, parents' opinions and knowledge about climate change do not differ hugely from those of the general population, but there are differences. These can be leveraged with parents in conversations that recognize the particular points of view of parents, as well as their constraints and concerns, as indicated in the following takeaways.

- **Help parents prepare and adapt to extreme weather.**

Parents don't appear to be well prepared physically or cognitively for extreme weather emergencies though they are experiencing harm. Address these gaps, building empathy, awareness and preparedness by highlighting first-hand experiences of families on the frontlines of climate change in Canada. Rely on doctors and scientists to deliver these messages. Provide tips for being more prepared.

- **Build on legacy and responsibility narratives.**

Parents are inclined to think more about what they are passing on to their kids, as well as their own responsibility toward their children and the next generation. Use framing that draws on this sense of responsibility. Normalize collective action and advocacy as parental responsibility and modeled behaviour to be passed along to children.

- **Be optimistic but realistic.** Use optimistic messaging, but don't skip details. Keep it simple, but ensure there is enough information to relieve uncertainty and dispel misinformation. Parents lack general knowledge about climate change and solutions, so keep focusing on education.

- **Focus on joy, hope, solidarity.** Highlight the importance of personal relationships in working together to protect our kids' future. Provide information, but recognize that scientific narratives may not move people as effectively as those that emphasize emotions and relationships.

- **Recognize parents' loyalties to, and belief in benefits of the oil and gas industry.** Be wary about casting too much blame on the fossil fuel industry. Many parents are skeptical of arguments that solely blame the industry for the climate crisis. Acknowledge the contribution that the industry has made to communities, and focus on their responsibility to clean up their messes and pay their fair share of pollution costs.
- **Emphasize impacts on the health of children.** Use health impacts to help create more awareness of environmental impacts more broadly. Use health and safety frames (present and future) when talking about the impacts and risks of climate change in the community, in schools, in sports, in food, water, air, etc.
- **Make it personal.** Cost of living is often top of mind for parents, so highlight the affordability of an energy transition, but make it personal. Focus on personal/family economic benefits, without eliciting feelings of shame or guilt.
- **Acknowledge time constraints.** Find ways parents can act easily, in short periods of time, within their existing networks and family lifestyles.
- **Bring the kids along.** Engage parents through their kids. Empower educators and create safe, accessible, fun opportunities for family participation in climate engagement. Take advantage of kids' natural curiosity and care about the world, to reach their parents as well.
- **Connect the dots, illustrate the future.** Cost of living, global instability, war, and misinformation are all high on the list of parent's biggest concerns, often eclipsing the environment. But these are all deeply connected to climate change and can be addressed with action that benefits the environment and people. Help parents see these interconnections and what a future that values humans *and* nature could look like.
- **Understand social values.** Social values play a larger role influencing climate engagement than parental status. So communicating in frames that resonate with these worldviews will also help engage parents. Many parents fall into the Disengaged middle segment, who are concerned but face barriers. Many will also align with their regional segmentation, so it is worth getting to know these social value segments and how to engage them with frames that align with their worldviews and ideologies.