

Climate change and parenting

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As many authors argue in this book, 2020 has been a shockingly unique year. The bushfires have scarred environments and communities in Australia to an unprecedented scale. Decades of recovery lie ahead of us as communities grasp the extent of the new climate normal, and as we develop new ways to deal with decreasing rainfall, increasing temperatures and more intense storms and the like. Then, as Australia began to emerge from the unprecedented devastation, a global pandemic took the spotlight at lightning speed, decimating economies and creating personal upheaval for everyone on the planet. So little is known about the pandemic. In a world where exponentially increasing populations means that space becomes a luxury, it has proven difficult to prevent further spread of the virus. We are only slowly starting to understand what the so-called 'new normal' will look and feel like for our uncertain future.

Amidst this chaos, we are the proud parents of a gorgeous 14-month-old boy. Yes, we are raising a child at a time when one may legitimately wonder what the state of our planet will be like for the months, years and decades to come. We are raising a child at a time when both parents had to wear masks in one and the same year to both prevent the inhalation of hazardous bushfire smoke and then to prevent the spread of a wildly infectious virus. These are times where one should

question how we, as members of society, will formulate meaningful responses to the ever-increasing global complexity: what is the world that our children will grow up in like? How can today's crises empower parents and children across the globe to cease the current political standstill and instead implement sustainable strategies to prevent further destruction?

Unfortunately, in this chapter we will not be answering those questions. If only we could! Instead, we will give an anecdotal and at times lay account of our experiences as new parents, the personal struggles we faced trying to balance surviving early parenthood with sustainable living, how we intend to learn from the experiences of 2020, and how we aim to turn these learnings into tangible strategies for our boy to do his bit in, hopefully one day, getting our planet, our spirits and our collective thinking back on track. No pressure, young man!

This chapter contains a very personal account, one in which we look back at some of the external pressures and challenges that we confronted over the past 14 months. Many of those challenges relate to our planet's climate health, but in our case also relate to our own individual health, and at times a combination of both. Our learnings may not be applicable to other young or soon-to-be parents. But as we unpack our learnings through the lens of a parent who experiences mental health challenges, we add a voice to the growing movement that recognises the importance of talking about mental health in public. And definitely when it concerns our climate!

We will take you through some of the considerations that have guided our parenting so far, and we will highlight the challenge of upholding some of the aspirations that we initially set out. But we end on a positive note — turning the challenges

of implementing environmental ambitions in the past year into strategies for the future.

Survival of the healthiest?

Before we became parents, we had grand ideas about the practicalities of parenting. For instance, we had absolutely no intention of introducing our son to pacifiers. No one timed it, however, much to our family's amusement, our decision was overruled somewhere between 10 and 30 minutes after our beautiful baby boy was born. (Whoever invented those should be knighted!) Despite that small debacle, in our attempt to parent responsibly and sustainably, we diligently did our research, made careful calculations and took conscious decisions about how we would clothe, feed, stimulate and comfort our baby boy.

Upon becoming parents, we quickly realised that there were factors that we had not taken into account and many of our preconceived plans quickly dissolved under the weight of some personal mental health challenges and our burning desire for sleep. The psychological impact of a crying baby should not be underestimated in those first few months when you are frantically trying to adjust and to understand what the cause for all the drama is; the dilemma of our son's tongue tie, his subsequent difficulty to properly breast-feed, and the pain that caused for Mum; or dealing with the seemingly endless amount of vomit and ... well, dirty nappies. The learning curve is steep and the personal adjustment is immense.

The first few weeks felt like our own little Survivor television show — though luckily without being voted out during Tribal Council (we'd have been voted off the island for sure). Yet, we

held our own version of Tribal Councils to discuss what worked, what did not work, what new techniques we wanted to try (and which ones we didn't). We were quick to decide that some of our highly aspired sustainability goals added unnecessary pressure to an already challenging time. We were keen to keep enjoying every minute with our newborn son, rather than attempt to stick to preconceived ideas to the detriment of our own wellbeing. The need for adaptation was further driven by a developing and underlying mental health challenge of one of our own.

We had to make some tough decisions, and ultimately we decided that (at least in the short term) the most important thing for us to focus on was nurturing good mental health and bonding with our little boy. We needed to find ways to take the pressure off Mum so that she had some headspace to recover from a bout of postnatal depression during a very hectic time in our new son's life. So, for example, reusable nappies were placed on hold temporarily, and the dryer was used more regularly for a few weeks. Vows were made to make up for it in other ways when Mum's moods had returned to normal.

The need for swift readaptation resurfaced during the bushfire crisis. As Victoria was blanketed under a thick cloud of smoke for days on end, and in a poorly insulated house such as ours during several consecutive hot days, we sought a healthy balance between our son's exposure to polluted air and our family's need to still be out and about — the latter being especially important as one of us was still on parental leave during this time. This involved a lot of air quality monitoring to plan outdoor activities at times when air quality dropped below the hazardous level, which worked remarkably well. Unfortunately, despite our physical proximity to a town centre,

the bushfires forced us to take the car more often than usual and ensure our boy was not exposed to too many pollutants, as we would otherwise walk. We know, it sounds strange, but we had to pick the best of two evils at the time, and again we had to balance the importance of maintaining good mental health against a sustainable ideal.

On the note of bushfires, the urgency of collectively responding to the crisis became painfully clear as news reports about the one billion dead animals and the imminent extinction of species such as koalas spread. And that extends to other species flagged with extinction, such as polar bears, rhinoceroses, and their natural habitats such as ice caps and savannahs.¹ What is particularly unnerving now, as young parents, is the uncertainty as to whether our son will ever be able see those species for himself or whether all information will come from David Attenborough-style television documentaries.

Information anxiety and the paradox of choice

In 2020, humans have access to much more information than at any other given time in history. The internet, email, social media, online news outlets (some giving real news, some giving fake), documentaries, books, publications ... the sheer volume of information that we have access to is daunting. How does a single human process and filter that much data? In particular, much of the information publicly available on the internet contains bias and inconsistency. For some topics, including those around climate health, sustainability, ecologically and environmentally friendly alternatives, parenting, or a combination of any of the above, finding objective, measurable and reliable information is difficult.

In the face of postnatal depression, being overwhelmed by information and an overabundance of choice has shown to be triggering. The most obvious (and perhaps temporary) remedy for these anxieties is to restrict information intake, reduce choice and simplify a straightforward routine. Perhaps not glamorous but very effective.

One of the challenges in early parenting in today's sustainability and eco expectant social media world is deciding which information is the most accurate. For example, plenty of information sources flout the benefits of using reusable nappies, and an equal number claim that the washing demands for reusable nappies puts a strain on an already scarce resource: water. We started doing the maths, but found the entire process to be too susceptible to uncontrollable variables.

At times it is honestly difficult to really know with any certainty which options are best. Most of the time a measure of common sense is required. And when a competing demand arises, such as our lived experience with a mental health challenge, decisions have to be made and ideals reshaped into something personally sustainable.

However, these were not necessarily easy decisions. The environment is something we both personally value. We want a future for our son and our future generations to be filled with clean air and beautiful scenery. Something 2020 has taught us is that our health depends on the health of our planet. But with such competing demands, misinformation and information anxiety — how do we make the best decisions?

One of our favourite quotes of the year came from Instagram. Anne Marie Bonneau (@zerowastechef) says: 'We don't need a handful of people doing zero waste perfectly. We

need millions of people doing it imperfectly.’ What a simple yet revolutionary idea, and not just to zero waste. This makes room for mistakes, learning, bad days, and yes, even our personal struggles and inability to function for brief periods of time. This was our balm to being overwhelmed by information, choice and decisions. This gave us a sense that perfectionism (often resulting in paralysis) can be let go.

Our plans for the future

We feel we sacrificed many of the environmental ideas we had about parenting in light of a mental health challenge. While this was certainly not our preferred route, we don’t regret the decisions for a moment. Our own good physical and mental health was essential to ensure we could be the responsible, courageous and prepared parents for our newborn son. But that also does not mean we are abandoning any future initiatives we can take to help ensure our son grows up with the knowledge, skills and tools to protect our environment.

For instance, we have set up a recycling scheme for consumables and packaging that our son will soon learn and actively contribute to. The ever-growing and innumerable recycling streams, in addition to our normal household waste streams, ensure we can provide reusable materials to groups and services that have a use for them. And we will introduce our son to these groups and services when the time is ripe for him to understand that recycling and reuse should be the default. We are also enjoying the benefits of a growing number of local buy/trade/swap groups, ensuring that our and other people’s toys, clothes and equipment do not go to waste but find another home.

In addition to recycling, we have also been making our house and garden more sustainable wherever we reasonably can. While reusable nappies were difficult for us to manage at times, ensuring our house's sustainability was usually as straightforward as discussing needs and opportunities with contractors and signing the necessary paperwork — or doing things all by ourselves now that our son spends a few days a week in childcare. These may seem like small initiatives, but they certainly feel like big steps to us as we are trying to adjust to life in a new house, with a child, and while balancing an occasionally reoccurring mental health challenge.

The challenge and necessity of travel

Like many other families in Australia and around the world, our family is a mixed-culture family and we also have a fairly extended family overseas. And, lucky as we are, our extended family has always been very keen to spend as much time as possible with our lovely little boy. However seeing each other involves a 16,000 km via plane trip. With Mum being Australian born and Dad being Belgian born, and both of us very close with our respective families, international travel has been a must for us. However, we are conscious of the enormous environmental impact of plane travel, but we also realise there really is no feasible alternative.

While we feel we have good reasons to travel by plane, it is also by far the ecological footprint we struggle with most. In fact, we fail to provide a meaningful strategy to address the issue. Sure, we have set up recycling streams and work on making our house more sustainable, but we know our efforts will not offset the whopping CO₂ emission generated by our

flights to the other side of the world. We can only commit to limiting other domestic and international plane travel to an absolute minimum, or offsetting emissions through well oversighted and independent carbon offset programs. However, to date, consumer access to such programs is either limited or (we suspect) inadequate. We hope to see an emerging market with better transparency in years to come.

We now commit to travelling to regional communities in Australia that can be reached via land whenever we feel the need to leave metropolitan Melbourne. As regional communities have suffered enormously from recent bushfires and COVID-19 lockdowns during key times of the year, this is a feasible way for us to give back to the community, minimise further impact on the environment, and introduce our son to the natural splendour and rich history of the regions.

The balance

For us, as new young parents, we are learning to balance environmental aspirations with the need to care for ourselves and for our new family. We are learning to accept that our journey cannot be perfect and that it is important that we ourselves are well so that we can encourage our son to have environmentally conscious values. Among some of the strategies Mary DeMocker suggests to raise environmentally conscious kids is to pick things to champion, that is, reasonable steps that do not put extra pressure on your household, but that are, feel or seem achievable.² For instance, it is simply not possible for us to forgo plane travel. With a mental health challenge and to maintain our brilliant family relationships, it is necessary for us to have family ‘nearby’ in physical proxim-

ity or available within a relatively short period. So, instead, we shifted our focus to making our house, garden and living arrangements as sustainable as possible, and to use the insights to build resilience and empower our son as he grows older.

We are also conscious that we are not going to be solving the climate crisis as an individual family making different choices. As Matt Beard has previously suggested,

[climate change is] going to need structural, widespread changes to economic systems, business models and cultural priorities. Rethinking our attitude toward kids might be part of that, but by framing the decision to have kids as a kind of ‘climate recklessness’, we misdescribe the moral reality.³

Matt’s argument is spot-on and absolute suggested reading for other young or soon-to-be parents who seek to balance environmental responsibility with personal health.

We feel fortunate for identifying that need early on in the process, as we believe the external pressure on new parents to act ecologically and environmentally responsible is enormous and at times unreasonable and paralysing. Too often new parents are made to feel inadequate in today’s pressures, particularly in a culture of online shaming. For the benefit and health of our planet, we feel that it’s important that people accept and acknowledge that not everyone can achieve perfection in sustainability and environmentally friendly choices. It’s probably more important to focus on empowering new parents to make choices that are achievable and sustainable for them and their families and to avoid shaming people into paralysis.

We are sure other parents will agree that every day already poses so many new challenges, but also new and wonderful discoveries.

Over the past 14 months we have witnessed so much change in ourselves as well as in our beautiful son. And as he starts to walk, stares at the trees and many birds that visit our garden and clearly enjoys the outdoors on our many walks, we feel hopeful about the environmental consciousness and empowerment we hope to equip him with.

References

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