

Family Lives and the Environment: Perspectives from India and the UK

Why we did this research

Governments, schools and big organisations often talk about ‘the environment’ and what people need to do to look after it. As part of this, many children are taught about the environment at school and in other places, and are encouraged to think about how their everyday lives fit into big environmental events and problems happening across the world. We wanted to hear about what children in different parts of the world think about this because we believe that people who make policies and decisions about the environment need to learn from children too. We hope that our research can help policy makers in India and the UK to learn more about children and their families’ experiences of their environments in different places and about any environmental concerns they have.

What we did

A team of researchers from India and the UK visited 24 seventh or eighth class children and their families living in urban and rural areas in South East England and Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states in India in their schools and homes. We interviewed children, their family members and school colleagues, and did different activities to find out about children’s everyday lives in their environments. These activities included making maps of familiar places and journeys, walking or driving around the local area and taking photos of important places, people and objects in children’s everyday lives. Through group discussions carried out in the children’s schools, we also spoke to 25 more seventh or eighth class children and principals or teachers from 12 schools, both private and government-funded.

What we found out

Children experience the environment in personal ways, not just as a school topic

People often talk about ‘the environment’ as if it were something that children only learn about at school or see on the news. The children that we spoke to told us many things they had learned about the environment at school but they also told us how they feel affected by what happens in their environments, and about the things that make a difference to how they experience their environments.

As Helena described, *“Where you are, where you live, it’s your environment. It’s like if you have lots of plants and you like go and water them, it’s going to change the environment. That’s just an example. If there’s not much rain the grass goes brown, and it’s like it’s going to change the way your environment feels. And like building houses, taking away houses, cutting down trees, it’s changing the environment.”*

We asked children to tell us some of the things they valued or disliked about their environments. When explaining the photo he had taken of his family’s fields (shown here), Hemant spoke of how much he likes the tree he is standing under, because this provides him with “so much shade and oxygen.” When making maps of their journeys to school, children who walked or cycled every day through areas with bad smells from discarded rubbish or vehicle fumes marked these areas as ‘dislikes’ on the maps, explaining how it makes them feel uncomfortable to be in these areas.



Children may adapt the things they do in response to environmental experiences and messages

Policy makers say that people around the world will need to ‘adapt’ the things they do in their everyday lives because the climate is changing. The children that we spoke to explained things that they and their families are already doing in response to their experiences of their environments. For example, children living in areas where heavy rains and flooding are common at certain times of the year told us how their families buy more food in case they become stranded at home and store this high up so it won’t get damaged.



Dharani, who lives in a village in Andhra Pradesh, explained how she took a photo of the roof in her house because this kind of roof “won’t be visible in a city”. Her photo (shown here) shows the objects that her family were storing on the beams of the roof, to prevent them from being damaged.

Children also told us how they changed the places where they play at different times of year in response to how seasonal weather changes cause them to experience them differently. Chandhrasekhar usually liked to play cricket on the lane outside his house, but explained that during the rainy season he and his friends stayed inside: *“The whole area turns into slushy mud. Feet would just sink into the mud if we try to walk. There will be lot of pigs roaming.”*

Some children also told us how they had made changes to things they did because of a message they had heard about environmental problems. Amrutha explained one change she had led in her house: *“We are not turning on the A/C because it kills a lot of polar bears in the Arctic. We won’t get to see the polar bears, but if you use all the A/C now then you won’t get more A/C in the future.”* However, some children felt that the things they had heard wouldn’t make as much of a difference to the environment as some people had said. As Callum reflected: *“Taking the car is not going to make that much*

of a difference, is it? Because like there’s millions and millions of cars in the world and it’s like just one more car on the road isn’t going to make a difference.”

Our research allows us to see how children consider the messages they hear in response to their experiences of their environments and what they think will make a difference in these environments.

Children are concerned about the environment and want to help lessen environmental problems, but they know that they can’t do this on their own

As those growing up in a world facing environmental problems, children are often taught that these problems might be lessened by people changing the things they do. Many of the children we spoke to told us how they felt concerned about the future. Humphrey said *“When I’m older we could have like problems with global warming. But I’m not entirely sure what the problems would be. But yeah, I think it could. Or at least for later generations it could have problems.”*

Children gave examples of things that they felt people could do differently to lessen environmental problems experienced in the present and the future, and many children gave examples of things they had personally done to help, in their schools, homes and other places. From discussions with children together with their families, it seemed that where other family members are also concerned about environmental problems, it can be easier for family members to make changes together. However children realise that many of the problems affecting the environment are too big for them and their families to do anything about on their own. Rosie expressed frustration that children were being asked to do things for the environment when others might be able to do more: *“We get told that we should be doing renewable resources. And, well don’t tell us that. You should be telling the people who have got the big factories that, because while we’re at this age, we won’t be able to do anything until we’re a lot older.”*

In summary, the environment matters to children. Children have lots to say about what they value and dislike about their environments. They know they are not in a position to solve the environmental problems facing the world, although many children are making changes in response to their experiences of these problems or messages they hear about them. Governments should educate people of all ages, not just children, about environmental problems and how to solve them, especially people with the power to make big, positive changes that would improve how people across the world, including children, experience their environments.

About Family Lives and the Environment

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