

Scorched summers

How extreme heat – fuelled by the worsening climate crisis – is reshaping childhood and family life in Australia



**AUSTRALIAN
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION**

**Nature
needs us,
now**

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. **We pay respect to their Elders past and present** and to the pivotal role that First Nations Peoples continue to play in **caring for Country across Australia.**

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Introduction

The last 10 years have been the warmest in recorded history, with 2024 now confirmed by the EU Copernicus Climate Change Service as the hottest.

Australia has always been a hot country, but as climate change intensifies, our summers are becoming unbearable. Last year also marked the first full year where Earth's temperature exceeded the *Paris Agreement* target of limiting global warming to less than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.¹ The UN Secretary-General has warned the world is now in “the era of global boiling.”

Australians are now sweating through hotter, drier summers than the generations before us did. Australia's land surface has warmed by 1.5°C since 1910, according to the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO's 2024 [State of the Climate](#) report, with the climate crisis making heatwaves longer and more intense and increasing the number of extremely hot days. This summer, fires in Victoria have destroyed precious bushland the same size as Singapore, while Queensland and Western Australia have also grappled with intense bushfire seasons. Across the globe, we watched in horror in the first weeks of 2025 as large swathes of urban Los Angeles burned to the ground.

Already in 2025, heatwaves – defined as at least three days of unusually hot minimum and maximum daily temperatures – have descended on all Australian states and territories, with temperatures in many capital cities soaring above 40 degrees, prolonged periods of sweltering days and sticky nights.

For parents and caregivers, extreme heat is no longer just an inconvenience, it's a growing threat to their children's health, safety, routines and wellbeing. From hot nights disrupting sleep and searing days restricting outdoor play, to the financial strain of constantly cooling homes and concerns about school closures, the effects of extreme heat are deeply felt in daily life.

This Australian Conservation Foundation report, based on a YouGov survey of 1,001 Australian parents and caregivers, highlights how extreme heat is reshaping childhood experiences and family life. The findings reveal widespread concern, particularly amongst parents of very young children, lower-income families and those with vulnerable household members. Many parents express a stark contrast between their own childhood summers and those of their children — once defined by freedom and play, now overshadowed by confinement, stress and caution.

The culprit is clear. Burning coal and gas is accelerating climate change and destroying the Australian idyllic summer, the places, wildlife and the way of life we love. Our children face missing out on the idyllic summer many generations before them experienced. Instead, they are experiencing summers of chaos. Man-made disasters are forcing families to stay indoors or cancel plans to stay safe.

In parallel to this, Australian families are suffering from spiralling costs of insurance, groceries and disruptions to their daily lives, while fossil fuel companies post mega-profits. As gas prices spike, companies are profiting while families struggle to afford power to cool their homes, leaving vulnerable Australians exposed to rising energy bills. A swift transition to more affordable renewable power will firm up our grid and lower bills, while simultaneously driving down deadly pollution.

As extreme heat events intensify, so too does the call for urgent action. This report not only documents the personal toll of Australia's changing climate but also underscores the need for solutions that protect families and ensure future generations can enjoy safe and carefree summers.

We need courage and commitment from our elected leaders. Most Australians agree: in fact, the majority (79%) of climate-concerned parents in our survey say climate will influence their vote in the upcoming federal election.

Our message is clear: we must phase out climate-wrecking fossil fuels to curb the worsening impacts of extreme weather and unnatural disasters. We must build more renewables, faster. The more we delay real climate action, the more we can expect extreme heatwaves and uncomfortable nights. The only way to turn down the heat is to turn off fossil fuels.

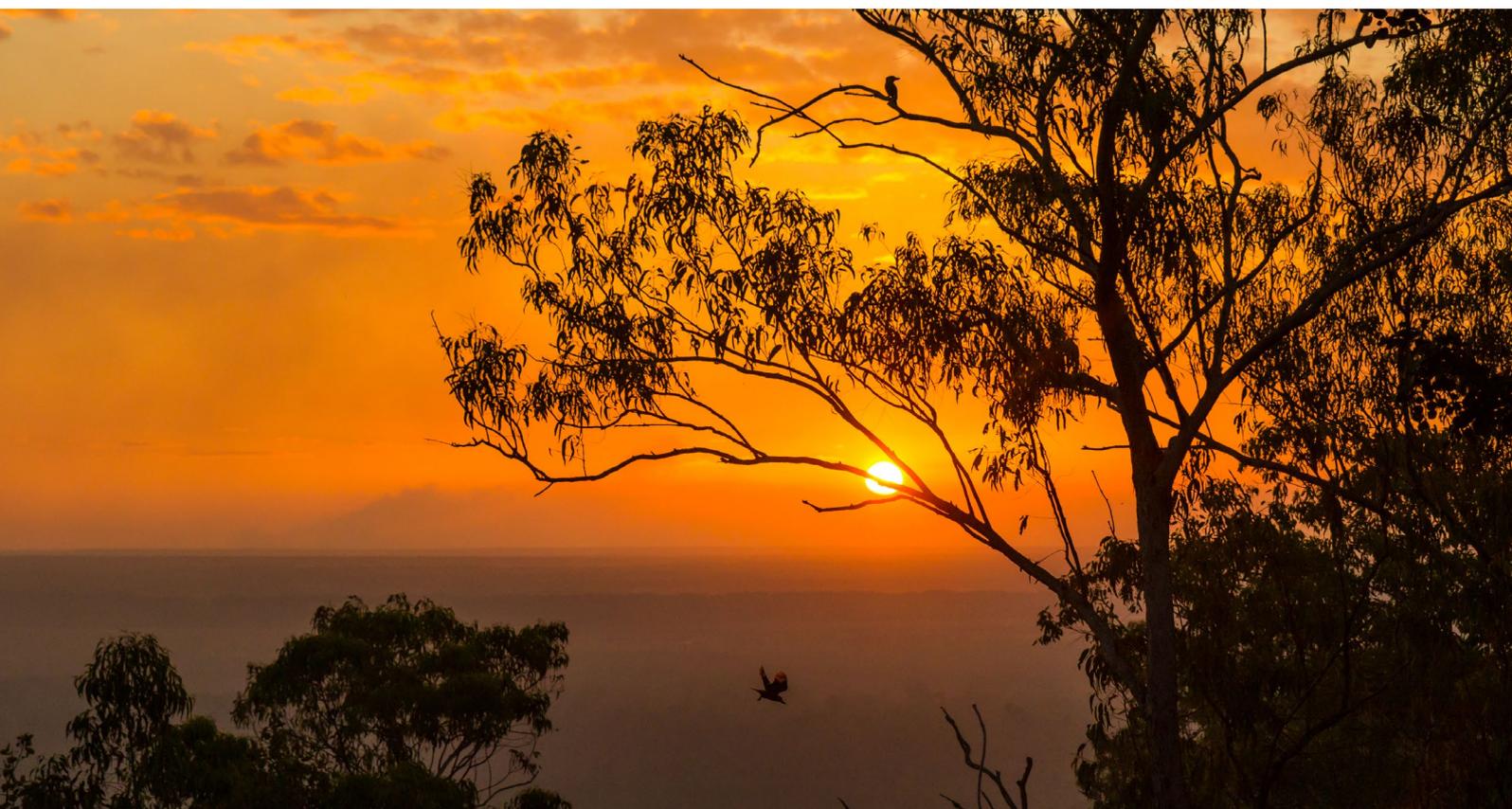
Definitions:

Heatwaves are defined as at least three days of unusually hot minimum and maximum daily temperatures for a local area.

Extreme heat is defined as a day when temperatures reach or exceed 35°C

Methodology

This report presents nationally representative findings from a survey of 1,001 Australian parents and caregivers of children under 18, conducted between 17 - 24 January 2025. The survey explores the impact of extreme heat on families, including concerns about health and safety, financial pressures, schooling and broader lifestyle effects.



Foreword



Our planet, our home, is facing an existential threat from climate change and there can be no doubt that this planetary emergency has been caused by human activity.

Whilst discussions around this climate crisis are often focused on its environmental and economic impacts, we sometimes neglect to talk about the human health impacts that are also of enormous significance.

The potentially deadly sequencing of these health complications are well documented in medical literature and include the direct impacts from the increasing number of extreme heat days. The unrelenting and merciless heat of 40 degree plus days is already causing deaths from heat stroke and bushfire smoke, leading to disruption of essential health restorative sleep and triggering mental health issues. Without urgent climate action, these medical consequences from climate change are only going to worsen.

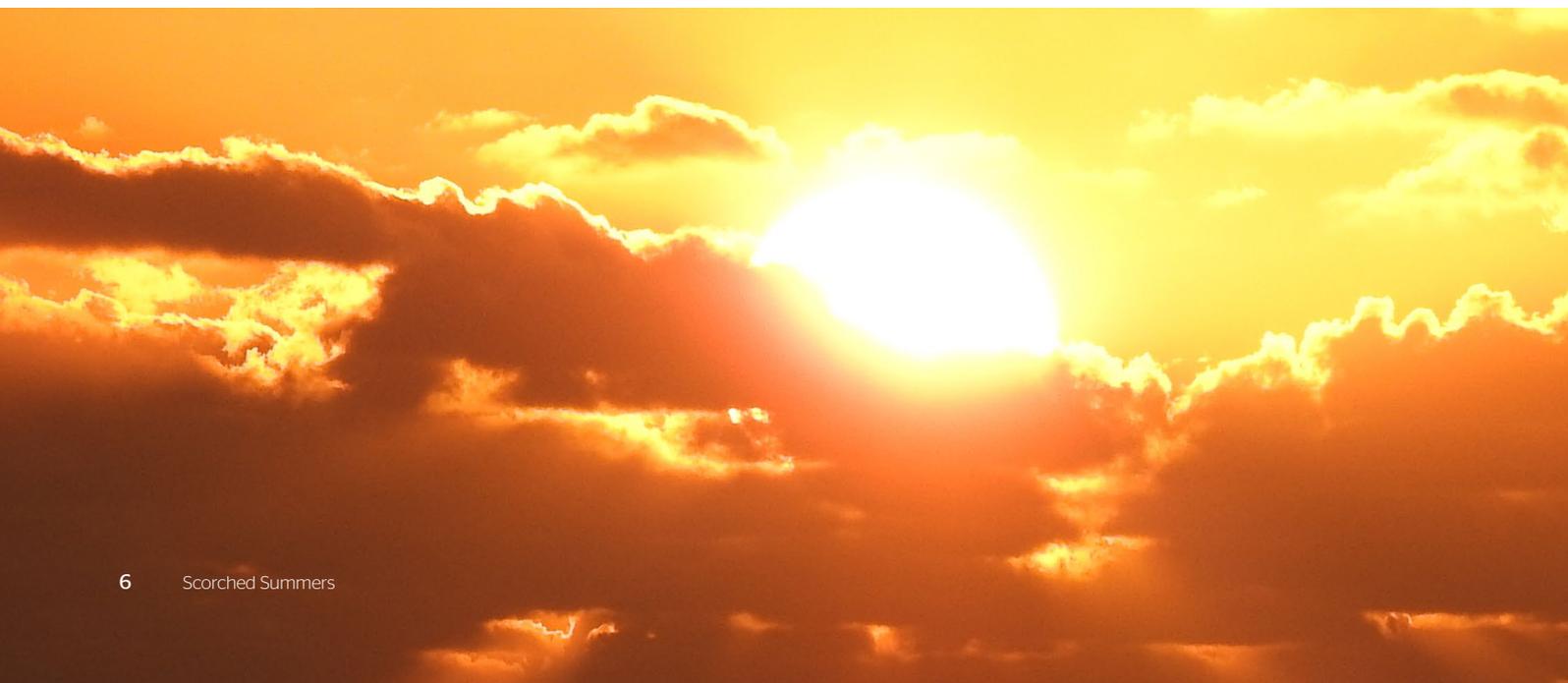
In this research by ACF, it is clear that Australian parents and caregivers are increasingly aware of these impacts on the health of our community and are concerned about the repercussions for all our families.

We are worried and anxious about our children and our elderly parents and we are right to be, because doctors know that these groups are the most vulnerable to heat related illness. In the absence of action by our current elected leaders, we are taking it on ourselves to protect those we love and we will take climate policy into account when we vote at the next election.

Climate change is a risk to the health of humanity and to our way of life. The evidence is irrefutable, the diagnosis and treatment clear; as Australia swelters under oppressive heat and the mercury hovers higher than it's ever done before, our political leaders must join Australian parents and carers in recognising that climate change is an urgent threat our collective and personal health, and to our treasured Aussie lifestyle. This threat requires genuine action, now. We know it and now our elected leaders must get on board and turn down the heat.

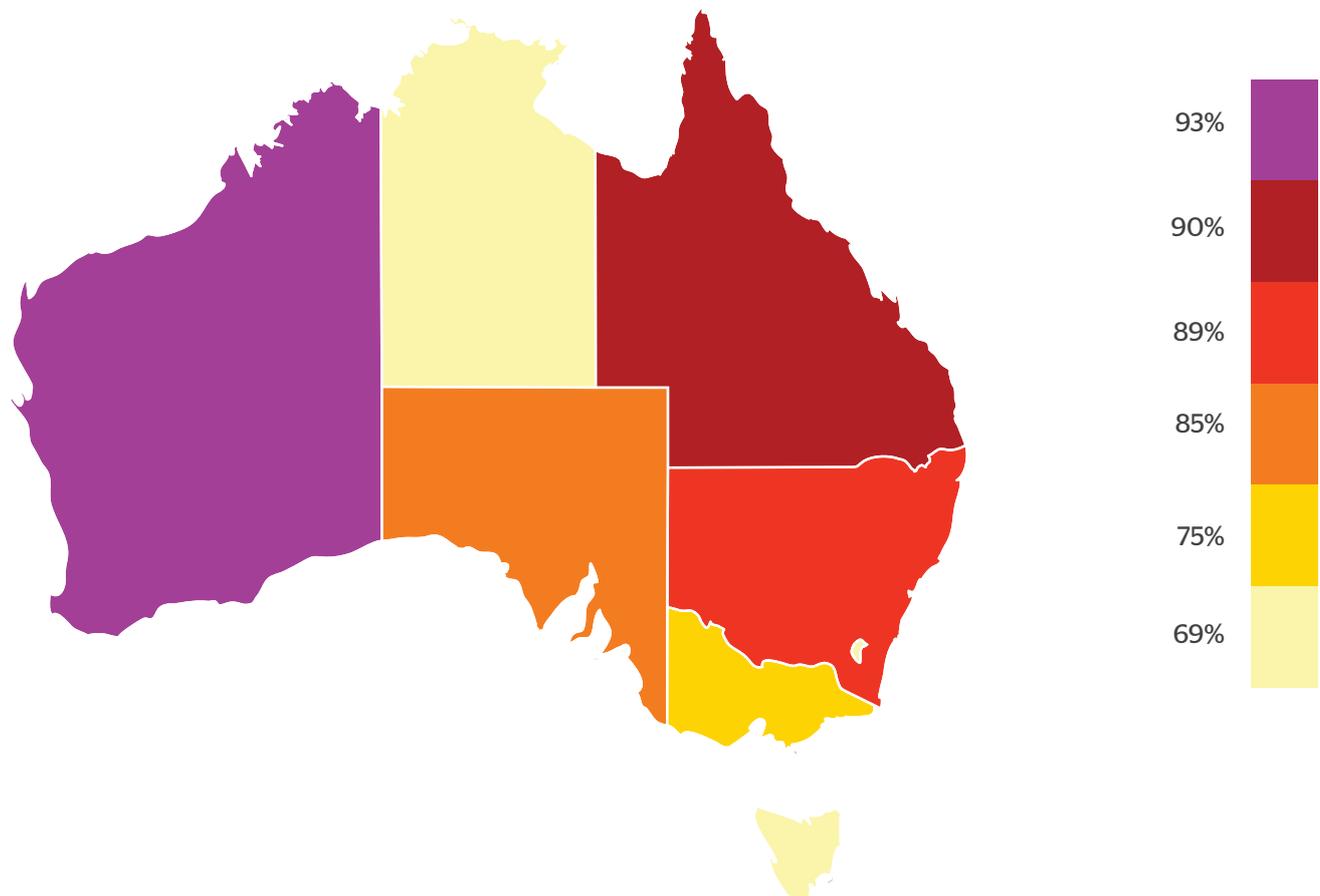
Dr Stephen Lightfoot MBBS FANZCA MEM
Specialist Anaesthetist, ACF Board Member.

Below. Pacific Ocean Sun Australia Photo. SCM Jeans/ iStock

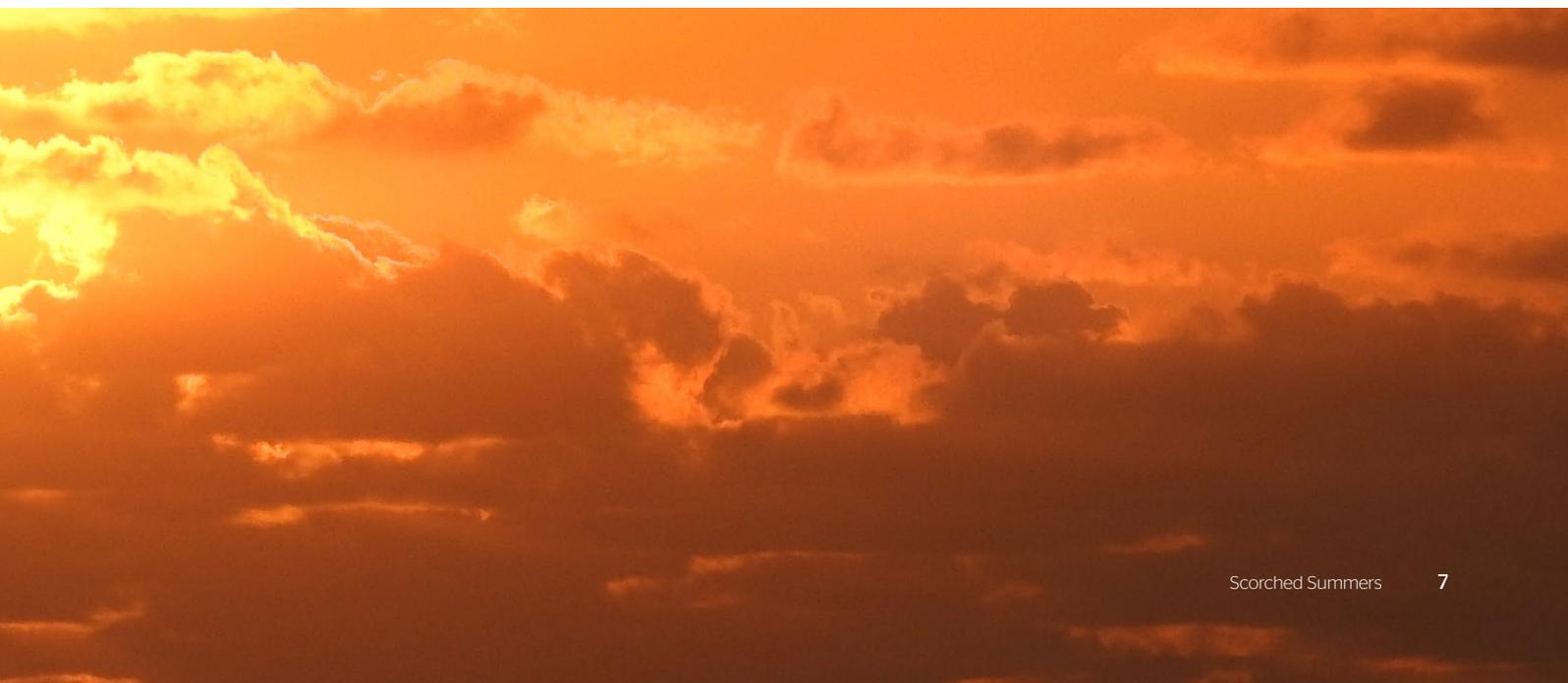


How heat anxiety varies around the country

Parents and caregivers in hotter states such as Western Australia and Queensland are more frequently concerned and anxious about the impact of extreme heat on their children.



** The percentage that reported they worry about the impact of extreme heat on their families.*



Key findings

85%
of parents

sometimes, often, or always worry about extreme heat's impact, rising to 89% for parents of children under five.*



* Of these, 23% reported they were always worried about this, 28% said they often did, and 33% said sometimes.

70%
of concerned
parents

say climate change or extreme heat will influence their vote in the upcoming federal election.



Nearly half
(45%)
of respondents

report limiting their use of air conditioning during heatwaves due to rising energy costs, with a majority 51% of families with incomes less than \$100,000 reporting limiting their use of air conditioning during heat waves.



Parents speaking a second language at home are more concerned

(76%)

than those who speak only English (61%).



70%
of families

said they are keeping children indoors more often this summer, rising to 76% for families with children under five.

The number was highest for those in Queensland (75%)



71%
of caregivers

express concern about sending their children to school on excessively hot days. This is more pronounced for parents of younger school-aged children and lower-income households.

79%
of families

report sleep disturbances due to heat, increasing to 81% for parents of teenagers (14-15 years old).



74%
of parents

express concern about how extreme heat affects elderly family members, particularly grandparents.



1. Widespread concern and anxiety about the impacts of extreme heat on children and families is just the tip of the iceberg

Extreme heat is a significant and growing concern for Australian parents and caregivers, with 85% in our survey expressing worry about its impact on their children's health and safety. Concern is particularly high among parents of young children, with 89% of those with kids under five reporting anxiety about extreme heat. Younger parents, aged 18-26, and lower-income

families are among the most worried, with 81% of younger parents and 87% of families earning \$50,000 or less expressing concern. Additionally, parents with higher education levels and those speaking a second language at home are more likely to be worried, with 72% of university-educated parents and 76% of multilingual households reporting heightened concerns.



“

The national park is nearby my home and work and bushfire is a real threat as it has been over a decade since it burned. The heat is [now] at a level that summer isn't enjoyable anymore. **It makes the whole season very unpredictable.** ”

Nicole, 52, Bulli, NSW



2. Extreme heat is causing significant lifestyle and wellbeing impacts

As extreme heat becomes more frequent and intense, families are adjusting their daily lives to cope with the conditions. A significant 70% of parents report keeping their children indoors more often during summer, a figure that rises to 76% for families with children under five. The most common words parents used to describe this experience include **confined, stressed, safe and trapped**.

Many families also experience disrupted sleep due to extreme heat, with 79% reporting sleep disturbances—this number rises to 81% among parents of teenagers

aged 14-15. Words frequently associated with these sleepless nights include **stressed, anxious and overwhelmed**.

Beyond daily discomfort, extreme heat is reshaping childhood experiences. More than half (56%) of caregivers believe their own childhood summers were more enjoyable than those of their children due to extreme heat. For many families, this means fewer carefree days spent outdoors, increased reliance on air conditioning, and more time spent indoors to avoid the worst of the heat.

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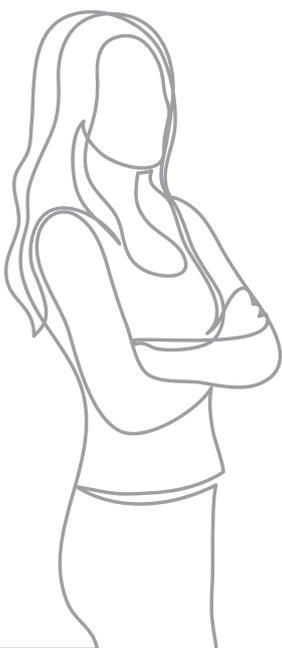
The weather is much more of a factor in what we do now, compared to my childhood. I don't remember my parents even talking about the weather and changing what we are doing. **I am very worried for my children, both now and in the future.** I am angry and concerned. ”

Nicole, 52, Bulli, NSW

“

I remember when I was a kid we had hot days - but not like now. Most of the time it's too hot for the kids to go outside and run under the sprinkler like we did, without risking getting sunburnt. The idea of a summer camping trip seems like an activity of the past no longer possible. Summer used to be days at the beach or pool, and the enjoyment of long days for even more fun. Now the combined concern of extreme heat, sunburn and threats of fire (we live in a regional area), summer outdoors is only possible in the early morning and late in the day... hibernating in the cool of indoors during the main part of the day. **This is not how I imagined I'd spend my days as a parent when I had my first child 16 years ago.** Compared to my childhood, the heat seems so much more unpredictable and the maximum temperatures seem so much higher. ”

Laura, 45, from Tanunda, South Australia



3. Cost-of-living pressures are impacting how families cope with extreme heat

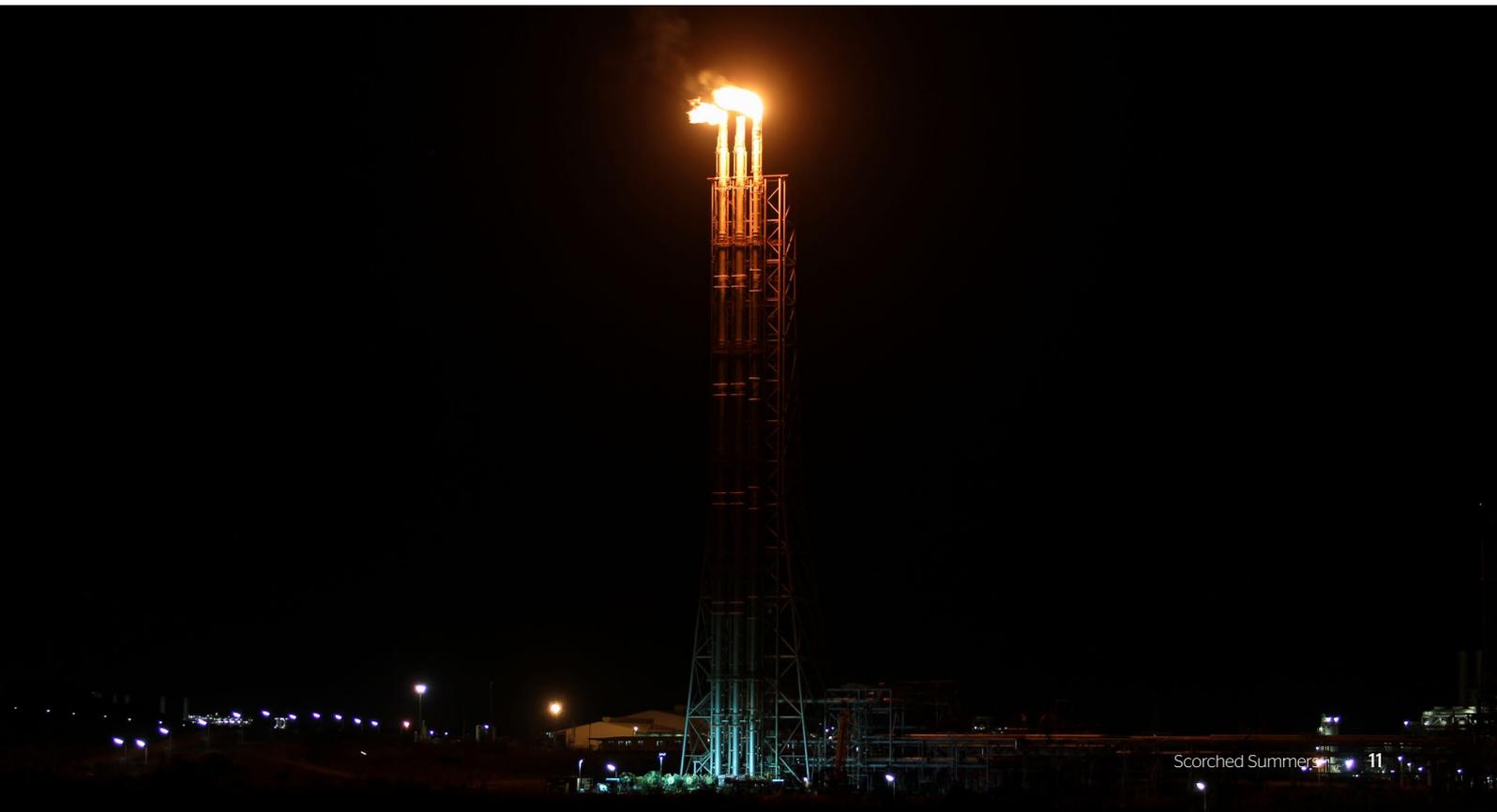
Rising temperatures come with overwhelming financial burdens for families. Nearly half (45%) of respondents report limiting their use of air conditioning during heatwaves due to rising energy costs. This percentage increases to 51% for households earning under \$100,000 per year, highlighting the disproportionate impact on lower-income families who may struggle to afford the cooling necessary to keep their children safe and comfortable.

The continued reliance on fossil fuels to power just over half of our electricity system is putting upward pressure on household electricity bills. Aging coal fired power stations are increasingly expensive and unreliable – and unpredictably shut down on extremely hot days to avoid overheating, causing supply constraints and price shocks.² Gas power plants are the single most expensive form of electricity generation currently used in Australia, yet are still part of the energy mix.³ These expensive fossil fuels are being phased out of the system, so energy suppliers are squeezing profits out of consumers and pushing electricity bills higher, to maximise profits now.

However, we have options to reduce the dominance of fossil fuels and costs to families right now. Renewables are the cheapest form of electricity for Australia⁴ and the growth of renewables, such as wind and solar, have helped reduce energy costs across the system. This is particularly stark during the middle of the day when the abundance of solar power means that electricity prices dip very low or even into the negative.⁵ But households, unless they have their own solar and battery systems, often don't see the benefit of these prices because of standardised rates and the upward price pressure from continued use of coal and gas power plants.

Accelerating the transition to renewables and enabling more families to access household solar and batteries, is essential for all Australians to benefit from low-cost renewables.

Below. Gas plant flare stack burning at night, Western Australia
Photo. KDS Photographics / Shutterstock



4. School disruptions

Extreme heat is also affecting children's education, with 71% of caregivers expressing concern about sending their children to school on excessively hot days. This concern is even more pronounced among parents of younger primary school children (ages 6-9), where it rises to 77%. Lower-income families report greater unease, with 76% of households earning under \$100,000 expressing concern, compared to 68% of those earning more.

For many parents, extreme heat means school days are increasingly disrupted, whether through early dismissals, reduced outdoor play, or difficulty concentrating in stuffy, overheated classrooms. Some caregivers recall never having to worry about school closures due to heat in their own childhoods, underscoring the impact of climate change and global warming over recent decades.



I work as primary teacher up the mountains in South-east Sydney (but I live along the Illawarra coast) and I was shocked at how much hotter it is up there.

Many days we have to keep the students cooped up indoors due to the extreme heat and other days due to extreme winds and the danger to their safety.

I was shocked by how often this happened and how it impacts negatively on the students' learning.

I'd never heard of this happening when I was growing up or with my own kids at school.



Nicole, 52, from Bulli in NSW



The other thing I never saw coming was the [number of] times that **school would need to be cancelled due to catastrophic fire danger days**, which now seem to happen several times per summer.



Laura, 45, from Tanunda, South Australia

Bushfires and education disruptions

The double whammy of extreme heat and climate change-fuelled bushfires is leaving communities and children extremely vulnerable. Beyond the threats they can place on children's wellbeing and safety, bushfires often cause profound disruptions to children's education. The 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires, for example, affected approximately 1.65 million people in NSW alone. Approximately 30% were children and young people aged 0-24 years. The bushfires had a disproportionate impact on marginalised children and young people, such as those with a disability or First Nations young people. Almost one in ten children and young people impacted by the bushfires were First Nations young people, while 3.3 percent of children and young impacted had a disability. At the height of the Black Summer bushfires, almost 600 schools in NSW were closed and 221 schools and early learning centres in northern Victoria. Many children reported heightened levels of stress and anxiety impacting their learning, along with long periods of school closures and exam cancellations.



5. Vulnerability and community concerns

Extreme heat disproportionately affects vulnerable groups. Almost a third of respondents we surveyed identified as having a disability or chronic or long-term health condition, or as living with a family member who does. The majority (88%) said they were worried about extreme heat impacts on their children, while 29% said they always worried about this, much higher than the average. The impact extends to older generations as well, with 74% of parents expressing concern about how extreme heat affects elderly family members, particularly grandparents.

This concern translates into behavioural changes: 69% of respondents reported sometimes, often, or always cancelling or altering plans with their children and their grandparents to avoid the risks posed by extreme heat. Rising temperatures are not only affecting daily routines but also limiting important family interactions and traditions.

Australia's silent killer

Heatwaves are a serious threat to elderly and vulnerable communities. Since 1900, heatwaves have killed more people in Australia than floods, fires, and all the other disasters put together. Australia's worst natural disaster was in fact a heatwave in 2009 that killed more than 400 people in the country's southeast, predominantly elderly and vulnerable people. Heat makes the body work harder to stay cool, putting extra stress on the body's systems. Devastatingly, during this heatwave – when temperatures in Victoria soared over 47°C – hundreds of elderly and vulnerable people overheated, or had their organs collapse, unable to cope with the additional strain on the body.⁶

Below. Kids Strike for Climate Melbourne Photo. James Thomas



Conclusion

The YouGov survey highlights widespread concern among Australian parents about extreme heat, with particularly high anxiety among younger parents, lower-income families and those with young children.

The double whammy of cost-of-living pressures and climate change means families need to rely on more energy use such as air conditioning to cool their homes, but struggle to afford it, leaving many facing scorching hot days with no relief. Parents also report the profound disruptions extreme heat is having on schooling, sleep and outdoor activities.

Climate change is an increasing electoral concern for parents, reinforcing the urgent need for policy responses to mitigate heat-related impacts on families.

These findings highlight the urgent need for policies addressing extreme heat, including energy affordability, school infrastructure improvements and urgent, greater climate action.

Footnotes

¹ A single year exceeding the 1.5C ceiling does not necessarily mean the overall, long-term Paris Agreement 1.5°C limit by 2030 has been breached. Further reading: <https://climateanalytics.org/comment/is-the-15c-limit-still-in-reach-faqs>

² <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/hot-mess-summer-blackouts-unreliable-coal-power-explained/#:~:text=Here's%20why%3A%20coal%20power%20stations,grid%20struggles%20to%20meet%20demand>

³ https://www.csiro.au/-/media/Energy/GenCost/GenCost2024-25ConsultDraft_20241205.pdf

⁴ https://www.csiro.au/-/media/Energy/GenCost/GenCost2024-25ConsultDraft_20241205.pdf

⁵ <https://arena.gov.au/assets/2021/09/the-generator-operations-series.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-17/heatwave-of-2009-australias-deadliest-natural-disaster/104648912>

⁷ https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Too-Close-to-Home_ELCA-and-Climate-Council-report.pdf

⁸ <https://electricvehiclecouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EV-True-Value.pdf>

Below. Australia Bush fire Photo. sirtravellalot / Shutterstock



Policy recommendations

“ Let’s power everything we can with clean, cheap energy from wind and sun. ”

The findings of this survey emphasise the urgent need for policies that not only address the extreme heat we’re facing today, but also tackle the climate crisis to avert catastrophic unnatural disasters in the future. Australia’s leaders need to take action now to champion renewables and cut climate pollution, while also reducing our exposure to unreliable and expensive fossil fuels that are making it harder for families to keep safe from extreme heat. Here are the key ways to champion renewables and cut pollution:

1. Build more renewables faster, in the right locations, and assist communities to access household renewables and electrification measures.

Australia is on track to transition from a 40% renewable grid to 82% renewable grid by 2030, with existing policies. But Australia can, and must, accelerate the rollout to achieve 94% renewables (equalling at least 222 GW) by 2030. This would allow for the complete phaseout of unreliable coal fired power and reduce household exposure to expensive gas.

2. Commit to science-aligned climate targets and develop an action plan that cuts emissions further and faster

Climate pollution from all sectors of the Australian economy are contributing to the extreme heat being felt by Australian families. It is essential that the Australian government sends a strong signal to corporate and industrial actors to cut climate pollution, through setting science-aligned climate targets and developing a whole-of-economy plan to reach those targets.

There are sensible policy measures that the government should back to further cut emissions this decade, and to help families experience the benefits of climate action. This includes increasing lower-cost renewables and household solar and improving access to electric vehicles, that save families significant fuel costs.⁷ Major corporations also need to contribute to reducing climate pollution, and there must be no more green lights for big coal and gas polluters.

3. Better resource people and communities to respond to unnatural disasters and extreme heat to keep our families safe

As disasters such as fires and floods worsen, it is critical that communities are properly resourced to respond to more frequent, severe weather and adapt to climate change. The government must commit greater resourcing and targeted support to communities most at risk of disasters, and to support frontline efforts to prepare for and respond to severe weather events. Australian buildings and infrastructure must be built or retrofit so that our homes are resilient to the impacts of climate change.⁸ This includes investing in thermal efficiency measures and household renewables that enable the cost-effective use of air conditioners.



Nature needs us, now



Australian Conservation Foundation

Wurundjeri Country, Level 1, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton VIC 3053 ABN 22 007 498 482

Phone 1800 223 669 Email acf@acf.org.au Web www.acf.org.au

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