

**Her:** If I take 5 minute showers...  
If I bring a refillable coffee cup every time...  
If I only buy second hand clothes...

I'm up early, doing math.

This study came out from UBC a few years ago called the Climate Mitigation Gap. They tallied up all the different lifestyle changes you can make to lower your carbon footprint. You give up your car, you stop flying anywhere, go vegan: nothing comes close to having one less child.

By their logic, having a kid means that you take on half of that kid's carbon footprint for every year that you're alive.

Having one less kid in the western world reduces each parent's carbon footprint by 58.6 tonnes each year. Which means, right, that one kid would add 58.6 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide to my footprint every year.

It's a big number. Picture a balloon 10 metres tall, 10 metres wide. That is one tonne of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Oh and apparently to stay somewhere near our goals, Canada's target is less than 1 tonne per person per year.

And one kid adds 58 of those balloons. That is a lot of carbon to spend on one little person.

I'm not sure we really need another carbon copy of me being minivan chauffeured to soccer practice and flying to visit their grandparents. But, what if we can offset?

They say in the study all of the other changes you can make to your footprint are small in comparison. But, what if I do all of them?

If I don't fly transatlantic that's...

Ok, if I don't fly home for Christmas. That's 0.55.

I'll give up my gas car and get a hybrid?

Electric car?

I'll give up having a car.

I'll uh, always use reusable grocery bags and stop forgetting them in the trunk.

I'll recycle absolutely everything, washed too.

I'll compost. And never buy the vegetables wrapped in plastic.

0.01. Not enough.

I'll buy those metal straws.

I'll go vegetarian.

Vegan.

Almond milk uses a lot of water, I'll give that up too?

I'll buy fair trade coffee?

I'll give up coffee. Fucking hell that's only .1?  
Not enough.  
I'll save dishwasher in the sink to water the plants.  
I'll cancel my Amazon Prime.  
I'll make all the baby food at home in a food processor.  
I'll do the cloth diaper thing.  
Wooden teething toys.  
Not enough.

We'll move offgrid.  
Solar power carbon-neutral tiny home.  
I'll grow vegetables in the garden, grow my hair long.  
Wear blousey linens and hang them on a line to dry.  
Not enough.

I'll knock on the window of the car next to me, next time one is idling in the ferry lineup. Look up and him and say excuse me, EXCUSE ME?! Can you turn that off?  
Not enough.

I'll post to the neighbourhood group about that house on the corner that runs sprinklers, flooding the sidewalk and their manicured lawn on a hot afternoon. Does anyone know whose home this is? What a waste.  
Not enough.

I will put my hair out for the birds to make nests with  
I will take shallow breaths, sip, sip at the air.  
I will shrink myself so small I'll be a crescent moon.

I can't do it. I can't do it. It's still not enough.

Kimberly Nicolas was one of the authors on that Climate Mitigation Gap paper, the one with the 58.6 tonnes. She talks to me from her office in Sweden after a long day of teaching. I'm glad she was willing to talk, I know this paper has had its fair share of pushback, but I need to know. What do I do?

**Kimberly Nicholas:** You know, we don't make any argument in the paper and I've never made any argument saying this means people should or should not, you know, do X, Y, or Z in their own decision of whether or not to have a child. So I think it cuts both ways, you know, you could look at these numbers and say, wow, it really has a big climate impact to choose to have a child. But to me it doesn't make sense, my life doesn't make sense, or, you know, I, I'm going to have a child shaped hole in my heart. And this is part of what I see as my purpose of being on earth. Then I think someone who thinks that absolutely should have a child and that gives them all the more reason to fight hard for climate stability, because that is a big part of accepting

responsibility as a parent to make the world as safe as possible and as healthy as possible for your kid. But on the other hand, I think someone could look at this and say, Oh, wow, that is a really big number. And I don't think I want it enough, or, you know, that doesn't fit with my priorities. And maybe this is a way of, you know, exploring that question. I mean, I don't think people will look at a graph and then, you know, make this like fundamental life decision. Obviously it's a much bigger and more nuanced and ongoing conversation than that.

**Her:** Do you feel that you've tipped anyone in a certain direction? Uh, like, has anyone reached out and say this was a pivot for them?

**Kimberly Nicholas:** I'm thinking of one person. Yes. One young man, um, who I met at a conference who said, Oh, after reading your paper, I decided I didn't want children. And that actually really stressed me out.

**Her:** Huh. A little part of me was hoping she would tell me what to do. It's good though, it's good that she didn't.

There's this ugly idea that the number of people is the problem. David Attenborough, Jane Goodall have even added their voices to the call for having fewer kids.

But it's a slippery slope from "we shouldn't be having more kids" to "those people are having too many kids" to "there are too many of those people."

I can rip myself in half over 58.6 tonnes but that's a drop in the ocean.

Did you know? The whole idea of "carbon footprints" came from British Petrol. It's a brilliant way to shift blame from the abstract to the tangible. Their calculator scratches an itch in us for boxes to tick and numbers to crunch. We can calculate our way out of this.

I used to get drunk and pitch my friends on going in on a big plot of land together.

*(We hear the sounds of a party.)*

**Her:** Okay, okay, so everybody, so we all buy one big chunk of property. It could be on an island, it could be in the interior, it could be just...up North somewhere. And okay, so everybody in the group has one kid. And then everybody can have everybody's kids over for dinner one night, everybody can go for dinner at another person's house another night. They have one child. And then basically they're like siblings or like cousins or friends with each other but they're not like only children do you know what I'm saying?

**Friend 1:** It's like it takes a village.

**Her:** It takes a village.

**Friend 1:** But so everybody has just one kid?

**Her:** I mean like you don't have to have one if you don't want.

**Friend 2:** So it's like a one-child policy? Well that sounds kinda familiar.

**Friend 1:** Oh god. How many dogs can we have?

**Her:** A tyrant in my own fantasies.

When it comes to populations, or even birth, control is the wrong word. With all the resources at my disposal, I failed to control this.

So much of this is truly outside of our control. I can't control who people vote for. Where they shop. What they do with their vacation days.

I know I should be mad at the larger forces, the corporate greed, the government inaction. And I am, but it's a cerebral anger, a theoretical rage. It's the individual choices that make me sweaty. Why do I get most heated about the choices that won't make any real difference? Maybe pettiness feels better than helplessness.

I can't make other people's choices. I can only make my own.

I am white-hot with jealousy at the people who can bury their heads in the sand about what their kids might see. Friends who say "oh, I try not to think about that because I want kids." I hate that. I want that.

And the truth is, for most people it makes no difference. The heart wants what it wants.

**Kimberly Nicholas:** I'm going to have a child shaped hole in my heart. And this is part of what I see as my purpose of being on Earth.

**Her:** Would I have a child shaped hole in my heart? How can I know?

*(We hear a hiss)*

We went camping last summer with our cat, first mistake, and brought our inflatable air mattress. Sometime along the drive she must have gotten at it because an hour into our first sleep, we started to sink. Imperceptible at first but we slowly dropped, our butts reaching the cold hard ground first, then our feet, then our heads.

What if right now there is a puncture mark and we wouldn't know until 5 years or 10 years from now when we're flat on the ground.

*(The hiss fades out, slowly.)*

**Host:** Expectant is written and performed by Pippa Johnstone. Composition by Laura Reznik. Sound design and mixing by Robyn Edgar. Dramaturgical support from Karina Palmitesta. Next time on Expectant:

**Britt Wray:** I also think there's lots of beautiful things about having a child, no matter what, and looking at what kinds of human thriving has always been possible in difficult situations. But actually, I mean, why do you have a child? Do you know that child? No. Are you really looking out for that child? No. You're having that child to satisfy a deep desire in you for belonging, connection, unconditional love, you're having a child for yourself.