



## Generation Action

**How to unleash the potential of children and young people to take positive action and create a better world for all.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world around us is changing faster than ever. The ways we have been living have led to major threats to our natural world upon which we depend. Alongside the ecological crisis we are also living through rising social division and inequality which is taking its toll on our well-being. We have it within our power to create a fairer, kinder society and to repair and restore our natural world. We must come together to take more action, or it is the young generation who will experience the most serious consequences of inaction. The question is – how?

Persil has always been about supporting parents to unleash their children's potential. We have long stood for the power of dirt and messy play in helping children learn and grow. In this changing context and faced with rising challenges, we want to continue to understand how to act as an ally to parents and credibly support young people's development and well-being. That's why Persil has been working with environmental charity Global Action Plan to conduct new research in the United Kingdom and Turkey to explore young people's values, how they perceive the values of others, how this affects their well-being, and the action they take on causes they care about. This research was conducted with children and young people aged 7 to 18. For the rest of this paper we will refer to this group as young people.

Research was also conducted by research and analytics firm, Edelman Data & Intelligence, to understand the effects of this changing landscape on parents. Exploring their hopes and concerns for the role their children can play in creating positive change and understanding where they need support in equipping their children to get stuck into the issues that matter to them – no matter how big or challenging they may seem. Both studies are reported

in this white paper and provide valuable insights for designers of social and environmental action programmes for young people.

### What we found

Parents care about the world around them but can sometimes feel overwhelmed and anxious with only one in four feeling optimistic when thinking about the world their child will grow up in. Three in five are feeling that the turbulent world we live in today is negatively affecting their child's well-being and consequently, they want to protect their children from major global issues. In the absence of better options, many parents understandably adopt an apparent 'shielding' strategy in an attempt to insulate their children from the realities of today.



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But despite the shielding strategies of the parents and adults around them, young people are all too aware of the realities of the social and environmental changes we are facing. They perceive the lack of engagement from adults around them as a lack of concern, with almost half of the young people we surveyed telling us that they did not think it was important to adults to care for nature.

Children and young people care deeply about the planet and other people and they feel worried about their futures. Almost all the young people we surveyed said that caring for nature (89% in the UK, 96% in Turkey) and other people (96% in the UK, 94% in Turkey) is important to them. Benevolence (kindness) is their most highly prioritised value, but they don't think others share their compassionate values. Fears about not fitting in and being labelled with unhelpful stereotypes prevent them from expressing their true values to their peers. This then perpetuates the myth that other young people don't care, which limits the amount of social and environmental action

they are prepared to take.

We found that children and young people want to take action, but they are frustrated at the apparent lack of concern they see around them. They feel isolated in their concerns and when they don't feel, see, and believe that others care too, they don't take as much action as they would like to.

This misperception that most others don't care when they actually do is known as the **'values-perception gap'**. It has been identified before in adults, and this is the first study that has found it to exist in children and young people. Our research has shown that the values-perception gap is present in children as young as 11 but significantly widens as young people get older. By age 14-16 they start to believe that other young people are more self-interested than they are compassionate. But we also found that this simply isn't true; most young people are compassionate and this misperception has damaging consequences.

### Results from Global Action Plans survey with 916 young people and focus groups with 74 young people found that:

 **84%\***

of young people prioritised

**compassionate values**

**over self-interested values**

but the percentage of young people who believed others would prioritise compassionate values decreased as they got older.

 **By age 16-18**  
**67%\*\***

of young people **thought other young people** would prioritise

**self-interested values**

**over compassionate values**

### When young people have a "values-perception gap", they were found to:

1. Have lower emotional well-being.
2. Feel more worried about the future.
3. Be less likely to act on the issues they care about.

This limits them from reaching their potential as Changemakers and as responsible citizens.

\*86% in the UK and 82% in Turkey. \*\*48% in the UK and 86% in Turkey.

Persil and Global Action Plan's hypothesis is that when young people take an active role, alongside others, to improve the world around them, their compassion as individuals and as a group grows. This normalises taking action, helps the values-perception gap to narrow, and reinforces the normality of caring. This benefits young people's well-being and agency, which inspires further action to improve the well-being of society and the planet.

Through the **Dirt Is Good Project**, we want to **support young people to take action** and in doing so, we want to unleash their long-term potential to do good. Persil has always advocated for the 'power of dirt' in benefitting children's development. This new research shows that getting stuck in together and showing how much they care, has even more potential to unleash positive impact – on children, their communities and the planet.



### Our solution

**Preventing the values-perception gap from widening**, and working to close it when it has, may be the key to unleashing the potential of young people to do good and to promoting well-being in a changing world.

We hypothesize that **collective action, grounded in compassionate values**, is key to narrowing the values-perception gap. This narrowing will unlock more action, by more people, on the social and environmental challenges we face.

**Collective action is a reinforcing behaviour:** Once young people start taking action together, they see how united in compassion they are with others, which increases how normal and habitual it feels to take action. Collective action, when grounded in compassionate values, can, we believe, snowball fast.

Through the Dirt Is Good Project, we will give young people the opportunities, skills and confidence to take action on the things they care about, giving them the freedom to drive the changes they want to see. As a result, young people will be better equipped to live in a world in flux and better able to cope with the challenges that lie ahead.

**They will be powered up to take action – together – to create a better world.**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Dirt Is Good Way** is an approach to youth social and environmental action that champions compassionate values, normalises collective action and aims to close the values-perception gap. It brings together the insights from this new research with the best of current practice to develop the Changemakers of the future. It sets out the principles that underpin **how** we will power up young people to take collective action and create a better world for all.

**The Dirt Is Good Project** is a global programme of initiatives underpinned by **The Dirt Is Good Way**. The Dirt Is Good Project sets out **what** we will be doing to support young people to take action together on the social and environmental causes they care about.

**The Dirt Is Good Way** is built on four principles that any practitioner working with young people can use to create activities:

### Principle 1: UNITED IN COMPASSION

helping young people to feel that they are not alone in caring and wanting to act.

### Principle 2: GET STUCK IN

recognising that **actions speak louder** than words and that getting active on a cause is fun.

### Principle 3: EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

ensuring young people can find a changemaking role that allows them to fulfil their potential.

### Principle 4: ON A JOURNEY

acknowledging that change doesn't always happen fast, that it is OK to make mistakes and that reflection is an important part of taking action.

**Our ambition** is to help young people take positive action on the social and environmental issues they care about. **Our objective** is to support the long-term development of the next generation to reach their potential to do good.