

Children's health and environment: A review of evidence

Experts' corner
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World Health Organization
Regional Office for Europe

European Environment Agency



The EEA's Experts' corner series

The European Environment Agency (EEA) is mandated to provide information to the Community and the Member States, that will help them to identify, frame, implement and evaluate policies, legislation and other measures on the environment, and to keep the public properly informed about the state of the environment.

In order to provide possible inputs to the developing work programme of the EEA, and to stimulate debate on issues that may contribute to the identification, framing and evaluation of environmental policy measures, the EEA, from time to time, asks independent experts to summarise their views on topical or upcoming issues, so that the EEA can consider publishing them as Experts' corner reports.

Experts' corner reports do not necessarily reflect the views of the EEA, or of any other EU institution; they are the opinions of the author only. However, they are intended to facilitate the broader dissemination of more recent environmental information that may provide useful inputs into the developing environmental agenda. The EEA hopes, therefore, that they will be of interest to the Community, Member States and other environmental stakeholders, whose comments on the contents it would welcome.

European Environment Agency

The European Environment Agency is one of twelve specialised EU agencies located in the various Member States. EEA and the related European Environmental Information and Observation Network (EIONET) were conceived to deliver improved data on the environment and to contribute to availability of better information for environmental policy-making.

EEA and EIONET were set up on the basis of EC Regulation 1210/90, adopted in May 1990 and revised in 1999. The agency set up shop in Copenhagen in 1994 and, by the end of 2001, a staff of approximately 75 was working at EEA's premises. The agency's 2002 budget is close to 25 million EUR.

EIONET includes five European Topic Centres, covering water, air and climate change, waste and material streams, terrestrial environment and nature protection and biodiversity. Where necessary, EEA buys-in expertise for projects from all over Europe.

„The agency aims to support sustainable development and to help achieve significant and measurable improvement in Europe's environment through the provision of timely, targeted, relevant and reliable information to policy making agents and the public“, states the agency mission statement. This must be done using existing data and information, building on and improving existing capacities in Member States and European Institutions.

No matter how thoroughly data is logged and amassed, it cannot be useful until selected, pooled and organised with known end-uses in mind. The EEA acts as an interface between data producers and information users by producing aggregated information that can then be put to work.

The geographical scope of the EEA's work is not confined to the EU Member States; most of the EFTA countries were members from the outset, and as of 2002, most of the accession countries have joined the EEA as full members, making the agency the first EU body to include these countries. Enlargement will bring the number of EEA member countries from 18 to 31. The Agency also maintains close co-operation with international organisations such as UNEP and WHO.

WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization was established in 1948 as a specialized agency of the United Nations serving as the directing and coordinating authority for international health matters and public health. One of WHO's constitutional functions is to provide objective and reliable information and advice in the field of human health, a responsibility that it fulfils in part through its publications programmes. Through its publications, the Organization seeks to support national health strategies and address the most pressing public health concerns.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health problems of the countries it serves. The European Region embraces some 870 million people living in an area stretching from Greenland in the north and the Mediterranean in the south to the Pacific shores of the Russian Federation. The European programme of WHO therefore concentrates both on the problems associated with industrial and post-industrial society and on those faced by the emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe and the former USSR.

To ensure the widest possible availability of authoritative information and guidance on health matters, WHO secures broad international distribution of its publications and encourages their translation and adaptation. By helping to promote and protect health and prevent and control disease, WHO's books contribute to achieving the Organization's principal objective — the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health.

Children's health and environment: A review of evidence

A joint report from the European Environment Agency
and the WHO Regional Office for Europe

Experts' corner

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Cover design: Brandenburg a/s
Layout: Brandenburg a/s

Cover photos: Rolf Kuchling (bottom left), Tatiana Divakova (others)
Backcover illustration: Ksenja Draskovic (age 7), Slovenia

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Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2002

ISBN 92-9167-412-5

© EEA, Copenhagen, 2002

Printed in Germany

Printed on recycled and chlorine-free bleached paper

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Foreword

Children's health and environment needs to be high on the political agenda. It is not possible to talk about health and quality of life without taking into consideration, and paying special attention to the needs of children. We must never forget that a healthy environment is not a privilege but a basic human right — not least for our children.

'Environment and health' is one of four priority areas outlined in the 6th Environmental Action Programme, which defines the Community's environmental policy for the next ten years. The fundamental objective is to promote a quality environment where levels of man-made pollutants, including different types of radiation, do not have a significant impact on or pose a risk to human health. In this regard, the action programme calls for special attention to the more vulnerable groups in society, including children.

Children are, for a variety of reasons, particularly vulnerable to the impact of environmental pollution. They are often the first to pay the price for unsustainable development. Children and young people also have limited opportunity to influence the present or the future. They do not participate in the planning and decision-making process. We adults bear, therefore, a great burden of responsibility — a responsibility that we must take much more seriously in the future.

The first thing that we must achieve if we want to promote a 'child friendly' environment is to gain a better understanding of children's situation today and of the relationship between their health and the environment. We need much more information and research data. This is largely lacking at the moment. This publication, *Children's health and environment: A review of evidence* is therefore a very useful tool for gaining a clearer understanding of the major threats, challenges and opportunities that exist in the field of children's health and the environment.

Promoting a healthy environment for our children is a major task that will require all our energy and application. But we cannot achieve it on our own. If we are to succeed, all the parties involved must co-operate closely with each other. The World Health Organization and the European Environment Agency have given us a good example of how successful close co-operation can be. It's up to us to follow that example.

I hope that our joint efforts will succeed in promoting a more 'child friendly' environment and help us take another step along the road to sustainable development. What is good for our children is good for society as a whole. We need to give children a voice.

Margot Wallström
European Commissioner for the
Environment

Foreword

Children's health and the environment lie at the centre of sustainable development. Failing to focus on this concept will amplify not only the health burden of today's children but also of future generations. There is no doubt that protecting children from environmental hazards *now* will be of benefit to the well-being of the population as a whole in the long term. We should not forget that the developing organism of a child is likely to be the most 'sensitive indicator' for the environmental health of populations. Can we afford to continue involving our children in this 'environmental experiment'?

The need to prioritize children's particular vulnerability was addressed by World Health Organization (WHO) Member States at the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in London, 1999. The European Member States recognized that 'exposure prevention is the most effective means of protecting children from environmental threats to health' and they committed to develop prevention-oriented policies and actions. At the same time, it became increasingly clear that scientific evidence on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children, as well as scientific uncertainties have to be translated into environmental health policies, including cautionary policies when there is the risk of severe and irreversible damage. This joint publication of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the European Environment Agency, which is based on the background documentation of the Third Ministerial

Conference on Environment and Health, is a first step in this direction. The process leading to this publication has increased the collaboration between WHO, the European Environment Agency and other agencies and institutions in the field of children's health and environment. Moreover, it has strengthened WHO's technical support to governments that have committed to increase their efforts to protect children's health in a number of declarations and policy statements. The forthcoming Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, which will be held in Budapest in 2004, will focus on the health of children and future generations in the broader context of sustainable development. This gives further emphasis to the importance of the need to implement the protection of children's health in environmental policies.

Improving the science basis for priority-setting and decision-making and increasing the effectiveness of the use of limited resources in the protection of children against environmental hazards is an important challenge for the future. This publication contributes to the capacity of European institutions and the governments of the WHO European Region to provide appropriate answers to the challenge of protecting children's health against environmental threats.

Marc Danzon
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