Today’s children may be the first generation to see a shorter life expectancy than their parents due to poor health. Pediatric health challenges have shifted from the infectious diseases of old, such as polio or tuberculosis, to chronic conditions such as obesity and asthma. These modern problems cannot be solved solely by the medical and public health communities. The decisions we make in many sectors -- such as housing, transportation, land use planning, business, and education -- play a vital role in preventing these chronic diseases from harming our children’s health, potential and future.

What is Children’s Environmental Health?

Children’s surroundings -- including the air, water and food they consume, and where they live, learn and play -- influence children’s health. A child’s environment plays a role in many chronic conditions, as well as premature birth, lead poisoning, some childhood cancers, and some birth defects. Visit CEHN at www.cehn.org/policyshapeshealth for more information.

Why are Children Particularly at Risk?

Children are more vulnerable to environmental exposures and usually suffer more harm from exposure to toxic substances than do adults. Some reasons are:
- Children have proportionally greater toxic exposure than adults.
- Children’s body systems, such as the nervous, reproductive, and respiratory systems, are more susceptible to irreversible damage.
- Children have many years of life ahead of them to develop disease after exposure.

What Shapes Children’s Environments?

Many factors shape children’s environments, and thus their health and future. Some examples are practices and policies in education, transportation, housing, land use, commerce, and agriculture.

Yet the relationship between a child’s surroundings and his or her health rarely enters into the decisions that influence their environments. For example:
- Regulations rarely consider children’s differing behavior or exposures compared to adults.
- Standards are usually based on healthy adult males.
- Testing requirements don’t fully consider the vulnerabilities of developing systems.
- Standards do not adequately consider the length of children’s lives nor potential multi-generational effects.

Charting a Path to Improved Children’s Environmental Health

Creating a healthier environment for children requires collaboration, coordination, strategic planning and common goals between all sectors of government, the private sector, research and other key stakeholders.

Strategies for a Collaborative Approach

The National Prevention Council’s recommendations for a Healthy and Safe Community Environment chart a path toward children’s environmental health in all policies.

Its recommendations include:
- Including health criteria in decision-making across sectors; and
• Defining community well-being as inclusive of health considerations and determinants in many sectors, such as transportation, public safety, education, land use and air quality.

**W**e all have the responsibility to assure that our decisions protect children’s health and future.

Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection with Children’s Health</th>
<th>Examples of Protecting Children’s Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing</strong></td>
<td>1. Health-protective regulations, building codes, and standards for construction and furnishing materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Enforcement to maintain a quality housing stock.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Community-based resources for vulnerable families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land Use, Planning and Zoning</strong></td>
<td>1. Incorporating health into community design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Ensuring that minority and low income neighborhoods are not disproportionately exposed to environmental contaminants.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Improving neighborhood safety and “walkability.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chemical Exposures</strong></td>
<td>1. Understanding children’s exposures through biomonitoring (looking for chemicals in blood, urine, tissue samples).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Health-protective regulatory standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Safer, less toxic products.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Resources to help us meet this responsibility include:**

• Children’s Environmental Health Network, [www.cehn.org/policyshapesheshealth](http://www.cehn.org/policyshapesheshealth)
• Assn. of State & Territorial Health Officials, [www.astho.org/Programs/Environmental-Health/](http://www.astho.org/Programs/Environmental-Health/)
• National Assn. of County & City Health Officials, [www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/HiAP/index.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/HiAP/index.cfm)
• National Assn. of Local Boards of Health, [www.nalboh.org/Environmental_Health.htm](http://www.nalboh.org/Environmental_Health.htm)
• National Center for Healthy Housing, [www.nchh.org](http://www.nchh.org)
• National Conference of State Legislatures, [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org) GO 18111
• Safe Routes to School National Partnership, [www.saferoutespartnership.org/](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/)

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