

Shape the Future of Life



Healthy Environments

for Children

in South Africa

Shape the Future of Life - Healthy Environments for Children



Introduction

Up to one-third of the burden of death and disease in the world is attributable to factors in the environment. While children under the age of 5 years make up only around 10% of the world's population, they nevertheless bear over 40% of the environment-related burden of ill health. Unhealthy environments contribute to the deaths of over five million children under the age of 14 years each year. The major environmental threats to children's health and safety occur in the very places in which they ought to be protected - their homes, schools and neighbourhoods.



Vulnerability of children to environmental hazards

Children are particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards. Relative to adults, they have higher rates of ingestion, respiration and metabolism, and their organs and systems are incompletely developed. In addition, children are naturally curious, and may in the process of exploring their environments touch or ingest toxic substances, or put their physical safety at risk. The worst environmental threats are faced by children who live in conditions of poverty, where they may confront multiple environmental risks. High levels of malnutrition among poor children may increase their vulnerability to environmental threats. Exposure to environmental hazards in childhood may lead to irreversible, life-long consequences for health.



Environmental threats to the health of South African children

While wide-ranging environmental threats to the health of South African children exist, certain settings

are associated with particularly high burdens of ill health. Underdeveloped rural areas, impoverished urban housing settlements, and areas of inner city



degeneration are amongst these. For example, more than half of South African households may be exposed to indoor air pollution on a daily basis from the fuels (such as wood, coal, cow dung, crop waste and paraffin) used for cooking. This is associated with an increase in the burden of respiratory illnesses, especially acute respiratory infections such as pneumonia in young children. Unsafe energy sources have also been associated with high levels of burn injuries and paraffin poisoning in South Africa. Diarrhoeal diseases, associated with inadequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene education, as well as poor food preparation facilities and practices, remain among the top five killers of young South African children. In poor urban townships, as many as 60% of first grade school children may have blood lead levels which equal or exceed international action levels. High blood lead levels are associated with reduced IQ scores, poor school performance, and adverse changes in child behaviour.



The origin of the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO's Director-General, announced her intention to launch a global mass movement to tackle the worldwide environmental crisis affecting children's health at the World Health Assembly in May 2002. Increasing awareness of the severe impacts of environmental hazards on the health of children, coupled with WHO's conviction that its top priority in health and development must be investing in the future - in children and the young - spurred the Organisation to launch the "Healthy Environments for Children Initiative". This took place on 1 September 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Now known as the global Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA), the movement has received world-wide interest, and is rapidly gaining momentum in regions and countries around the world.



South Africa's response

The South African Minister of Health was among the first to publicly declare her commitment and endorsement of the Healthy Environments for Children Initiative. With wide-

ranging and often severe environmental threats to the health and safety of South African children, there is an acknowledged need for scaled-up action in this regard. Many South African political leaders have pledged to place issues of children, environment and health higher up on political agendas. Following enthusiastic celebrations for World Health Day 2003, which focused on Healthy Environments for Children, national, provincial and local governments are encouraging communities and partners to take action to create Healthy Environments for Children throughout the country. Society at large is invited to support the development of a Healthy Environments for Children Alliance in South Africa (HECA-SA).



The essence of HECA

The draft global HECA mission statement relates to the development of "a world-wide alliance to intensify global action on environmental risks to children's health that arise from the settings where they live, learn, play and earn, by providing knowledge, increasing political will, mobilizing resources, and catalyzing action."

Amongst the approaches of HECA are:

- Placing children, environment and health concerns higher up on political agendas;
- Focusing on cross-sectoral action;
- Expanding and scaling up action around children, environment and health;
- Developing new and innovative ways of working with limited resources;
- A strong focus on community participation; and
- The strengthening of existing initiatives.

The core functions include:

- Advocacy and awareness-raising;
- Provision of knowledge, information exchange and expertise for decision-making;
- Promotion of effective policies and action at all levels, and across all sectors;
- Support for countries and communities in creating and maintaining healthy environments for children;
- Monitoring and evaluation of progress.

The priority issues of focus for HECA are household water security, hygiene and sanitation, air pollution, especially indoor air pollution, disease vectors, chemical hazards (including lead, mercury and pesticides), and unintentional injuries such as burns, paraffin poisoning and drowning.



A settings-based approach

In light of the major portion of environmental threats to children's health occurring in their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, HECA encourages a settings-based approach to action, supporting efforts to "tackle the environmental risks to children's health in the places in which they are conceived, born, live, grow, learn and play."

Risks to Children's Health





What you can do:

Neighbourhoods

- Make public places smoke-free;
- Advocate for safer roads and improved public transport and traffic management;
- Eliminate the use of lead in petrol;
- Plant trees and clean up rivers;
- Improve waste disposal and management systems;
- Ensure that playgrounds are safe and child-friendly.

Schools

- Ensure access to sufficient quantities of clean water;
- Ensure the availability of sufficient separate toilets for girls and boys;
- Plant trees and keep school grounds clean and safe;
- Ensure that schools are located well away from industrial areas, busy roads and waste dumps;
- Promote good ventilation and lighting in schools;
- Encourage healthy and well-balanced diets, for example through healthy tuckshop policies and the development of food gardens;
- Promote regular exercise for school children.

Homes

- Store water in covered, clean containers in cool places;
- Promote the use of cleaner, safer fuels and stoves for cooking;
- Keep children away from smoke, and open windows and doors when cooking;
- Discourage smoking in the home;
- Teach children to wash their hands with soap and water after using the toilet, before eating and after playing in dirty areas;
- Store pesticides, fuels, cleaning substances and medicines out of the reach of children.



Further information
on **Healthy
Environments for
Children** may be
obtained from:



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