

Make the **CASE** for Children's Health



CATHOLIC COALITION
FOR CHILDREN AND
A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

www.usccb.org/case

PROTECTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

For generations, the Catholic community has reached out to children.... We have defended their right to life itself and their right to live with dignity, to realize the bright promise and opportunity of childhood. Now we renew this commitment and build on it. We seek to bring new hope and concrete help to a generation of children at risk. (*Putting Children and Families First*, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1991).



As Catholics, we are called to care for God's gift of creation and to protect the most vulnerable among us. The poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering. While every child deserves our concern, the option for the poor and vulnerable, rooted in the Gospel and the Church's teaching, compels us to protect especially poor children and their physical environment.

The Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment (CASE), a coalition of major Catholic religious, health, social

service, and policy organizations, has come together to respond to this concern. CASE informs and educates the larger Catholic community – building a constituency for children’s health. It also seeks to promote institutional reform and public policies to ensure that all children, born and unborn, have the opportunity to grow up in a healthy and safe environment. (See CASE members listed on back cover).

CHILDREN ARE NOT LITTLE ADULTS

Children’s bodies, behaviors, and size make them different from and more vulnerable than adults to many environmental health hazards. In proportion to their size, children breathe more air than adults. Because children’s immune systems are underdeveloped relative to adults and may be exposed to environmental hazards over the long course of their growing years, they are more susceptible to illnesses such as asthma and learning disabilities, which can be environmentally triggered. Exposure to air pollutants and toxins is significantly more harmful to children than adults.

Children in poverty and children of color are at a disproportionate risk, with routinely higher rates of lead poisoning, and asthma-related deaths and hospitalization. Exposure to pesticides may pose a threat to children in rural communities, particularly when one or both parents are farmers, ranchers or agricultural workers.

Although children's health overall has improved due to better preventative and health screening services and treatment, there are still many children at risk. Children in poverty are less likely to have access to these health services. Their communities are more likely to be polluted, to host toxic waste dumps, and less likely to have potable water. The result is that children in poverty are more likely to suffer from health problems related to their environment.



While the scientific and medical communities continue to explore and debate the extent to which children's health is affected by environmental factors, some children do suffer from respiratory problems and the harmful effects of lead and mercury. For example, asthma is the leading chronic illness among children in the United States and the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. In 1996, almost a third of the 15 million people in the United States affected by asthma were children. Each year 150,000 are hospitalized due to asthma, and approximately 300 children die.

Exposure to certain toxins like lead and mercury can affect children's development permanently. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that 4.4% of children ages 1 to 5 have too much lead in their bodies. A majority of housing units in the U.S. still contain some lead paint. In addition to contaminated dust and soil from deteriorating lead-based paint in older homes and buildings, another source of lead exposure is contaminated drinking water from pipe solder. Pregnant women and women of child-bearing age are also at risk because once ingested, lead can affect the unborn fetus by crossing the placenta, resulting in developmental problems.

“...Humanity today must be conscious of its duties and obligations towards future generations.”

Pope John Paul II
Centesimus Annus, 1991

In July 2000, the National Academy of Sciences concluded that each year, more than 60,000 children are born at risk for neurodevelopmental problems associated with *in utero* mercury exposure. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that coal-fired electric utilities are the largest source of mercury air emissions, followed by municipal waste combustors, medical waste incinerators, and hazardous waste combustors.

In the face of these challenges, Catholics need to learn more, care more, and do more to address threats to our children and to our environment. CASE members have begun to harness the resources of their organizations to assure that all children, but especially poor children, can grow up safe and healthy. Their initiatives include:

- Providing information on lead and other potential hazards to low-income housing counselors;
- Educating professionals in the fields of social services, housing, and health about environmental hazards to children;
- Addressing environmental health issues through local school boards and sharing successful models;
- Developing environmentally responsible initiatives in Catholic institutions;
- Making sure that all diocesan and parish facilities are safe environments;
- Addressing environmental concerns in disproportionately affected communities in rural and urban settings;
- Advocating for public policies at the national, state, and local level that promote a safe environment for children.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Contact your Catholic (CASE) partners and support their activities and initiatives to address children's environmental health.
- Find out if your school administrator, parent group or school board have discussed the effects of environmental hazards on children.
- Encourage your parishes and community organizations to address issues related to children's health and the environment.
- Pay attention to reports and media coverage on children's health and the environment.
- Make your concerns about the health of children and the environment known to your local representatives, state officials and congressional leaders.

References:

America's Children 2002: Key National Indicators of Well-Being

<http://childstats.gov/americaschildren>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institutes of Health

www.niehs.nih.gov

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Children's Health Protection

www.epa.gov/children

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