



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
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CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT
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Children are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and exposures to toxic chemicals in the environment. Their bodies, behaviors and size leave them more exposed than adults to such health hazards. Because children are exposed to environmental hazards at an early age, they have more extended time to develop slowly-progressing environmentally triggered illnesses such as asthma, certain cancers, learning disabilities and other illnesses that adversely affect childhood development. Exposure to air pollutants and toxins is significantly more harmful to children, born and unborn. 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.

BACKGROUND

In an effort to develop the leadership of Catholic organizations and networks to help address environmental hazards affecting children's health, a coalition of major Catholic organizations formed the *Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment (CASE)*.¹ In 2007, CASE members hosted a major conference on the effects of environmental toxins on unborn children, "Protecting Human Life and Caring for Creation," held at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This network of national Catholic institutions assists the bishops in sharing Church teaching on the environment, stewardship, justice, the common good, and the priority for the poor, and how these social teachings urge Catholics to care for creation and protect the lives of children who are vulnerable to environmental threats. This unprecedented and groundbreaking event brought together prominent leaders from the Catholic community, government, and the public health sector to learn more about how unborn children are exposed to environmental harm, how this exposure affects them later in life, and what can be done to better protect them. Building on this collaboration, in July 2008 a convocation on "Life, Justice & Family: Partners in the New Evangelization" included a session on "Toxins, the Environment and the Child in the Womb."

The USCCB and other CASE partners continue to support research efforts that will provide information about environmental threats that may affect children's health, such as the National Children's Study. The Bishops' Conference and its Catholic partners have supported the continued funding and implementation of the National Children's Study (NCS) for many years. This longitudinal study of 100,000 pregnant women, whose children will be followed from before birth until age 21, will help provide important information about how exposure to environmental toxins may affect children's physical, mental, emotional, and developmental health.

The Bishops' Conference and other CASE partners are continuing to monitor information about the effect of environmental threats on children's health and to identify opportunities to strengthen policies that protect children, born and unborn, from exposure to harmful toxins and chemicals. Last year, several legislative proposals regarding toxins, including phthalates, bisphenol-A (BPA), and endocrine

¹ CASE is made up of: Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA); Catholic Health Association (CHA); Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI); Conference for Catholic Facility Management (CCFM); Knights of Peter Claver, Inc. and Ladies Auxiliary (KPC); National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW); National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA); National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD); National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC); and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Office for Domestic Social Development and Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

disruptors that may adversely affect the development of children in the womb, were introduced. There is also a broader effort underway to strengthen how chemicals are regulated under the *Toxic Substances Control Act* (TSCA). Of particular interest, are proposals within TSCA reform related to the *Kid-Safe Chemicals Act* and aimed at protecting children, born and unborn, from harmful exposure to these chemicals. In its current form, TSCA has not adequately required the testing of chemicals already on the market, and does not effectively call for the testing of thousands of new chemicals yet to be introduced onto the market.

USCCB POSITION

As Catholics, we are called to care for God's gift of creation and to protect the most vulnerable among us. Caught in a spiral of poverty and environmental degradation, the poor and the powerless bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of environmental problems, as their lands and neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted, to be near toxic waste dumps, or to suffer from water contamination.

In the face of these challenges, the Catholic community is called to learn more, care more, and do more about the environmental threats to our children. "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*, p. 17).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Urge your Members of Congress to support greater protections for children from exposure to harmful toxins such as lead and mercury, and other developmental toxins that pose a threat to children's health.
- Call on your Congressional representatives to continue to support funding for the implementation of the National Children's Study, to protect children and our communities from environmental harm.
- Urge your local and state authorities to fund initiatives intended to assist public and private schools in providing an environment free of health hazards.

RESOURCES

A DVD and a companion study guide from the conference are now available. The DVD includes presentations by Catholic leaders, government officials, and public health experts. The accompanying study guide, *Protecting Human Life and Caring for Creation: Why Protecting Unborn Children in their First Environment Matters*, is intended to clarify the information provided in the presentations, encourage further dialogue and study, and lead participants to faith-inspired action.

To learn more, download the study guide from the USCCB Environmental Justice Program's website: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/case/studyguide.shtml>. To request a copy of the DVD, please send an e-mail to ejpfeedback@usccb.org.

For Further Information

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