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Kyle Buott, Halifax

Canadians know much of the

but President George W. Bush

ferred the heaviest casualties.

(bkipling@herald)

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Connecting the environment and children's health

By MYRIAM BEAULNE
and TAMARA LORINCZ

There has been growing awareness and concern about the environmental impacts of industrial chemicals on children's health. This month, the *Lancet*, a well-respected British medical journal, reported that over 200 industrial chemicals could affect the brain development of children. According to the authors, children's exposure to these chemicals is causing a "silent pandemic" of developmental disabilities, including autism and attention deficit disorder.

The toxic chemicals, including lead, mercury, pesticides, phenol and benzene, are not only used by industry, but are also found in workplaces, schools and homes. Children are at risk from a variety of household hazards, ranging from cleaning and personal care products to pesticides. Brain development is only one of the potential health impacts of these chemicals.

This year, Environmental Defence conducted the first Canadian study for harmful chemicals in children's bodies. Children and their parents from five Canadian families were tested for 68 chemicals, such as pesticides, PCBs, stain repellants, flame retardants and lead. The report, titled *Polluted Children, Toxic Nation*, indicates a need for more information about Canadian children's exposure to toxic chemicals. Many of the chemicals discovered in the families are associated with cancer, hormone disruption, reproductive disorders, respiratory illnesses and developmental problems in children.

This is troubling, because children are more vulnerable to environmental contaminants than adults, due to their physiology, metabolism, rapid development and behaviour. Fortunately, there are ways to reduce environmental risks and many safer alternatives exist to toxic chemicals. We need to clean up our environment and require

safer products to protect our children's health.

As part of its national awareness campaign, the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, in collaboration with Best Start Resource Centre, recently released *Playing It Safe: Service Providers' Strategies to Reduce Environmental Risks to Preconception, Prenatal and Child Health*. It offers useful guidance to professionals working with children and parents and it complements *Child Health and the Environment: A Primer*. For the public, the *Playing it Safe: Childproofing for Environmental Health* brochure provides helpful tips to reduce children's exposure to toxic chemicals. These documents are available online www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca.

In Nova Scotia, there are many initiatives that make the important connections between the natural environment and children's well-being. For example, the Citizens for a Safe

Learning Environment have worked for 13 years to create environmentally healthy schools in the province. The Environmental Health Association of Nova Scotia publishes a popular resource entitled *A Guide to Less Toxic Products* (www.less-toxicguide.ca).

Real Alternatives to Toxins in the Environment and the Sierra Club of Canada, Atlantic Chapter, have helped to reduce the cosmetic and residential use of pesticides in the Halifax Regional Municipality, and the Nova Scotia Organic Growers Association are supporting farmers engaged in organic farming and supplying organic produce in the province.

According to the Nova Scotia Lung Association, this province has one of the highest rates of children's asthma and respiratory problems in the country. The Active and Safe Routes to School program at the Ecology Action Centre advocates sustainable transportation to and

from school to clean the air and to improve the physical fitness of our children. The Children's Clean Air Network encourages people to not idle their car as another simple way to clean the air for our children.

But there is more that we can do. In our homes, we can use environmentally friendly cleaning products and eat more organic food. We can call on our municipal governments to ban automobile idling and to provide more sustainable transportation. Our provincial government should establish a provincewide cosmetic pesticide ban.

The federal government should institute mandatory labelling of toxic chemicals on all products, perform in-depth safety assessments on all chemicals that pose a health risk, set up a Children's Environmental Health Program to conduct more biomonitoring research, and expand public education on the environmental links to chil-

dren's health. Industry as well has a critical role to play to reduce its production, use and sale of harmful chemicals.

In its recent report, entitled *Environmental Threats to Children: Understanding the Risks; Enabling Prevention*, Toronto Public Health called on all levels of government and communities across Canada to take urgent action to protect children's health. When we pollute our air, water and soil, we are putting the health of our children at risk. Our children deserve better.

Myriam Beaulne is health co-ordinator of the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, and Tamara Lorincz is executive director of the Nova Scotia Environmental Network. Myriam will be speaking at a public forum today at 7 p.m. at Dalhousie Law School, and giving a full-day workshop on Friday, Dec. 1 in Halifax. For information, visit www.hpclearinghouse.ca or call 902-494-1917.