

Children's Health and the Environment - 2001

Judaism affirms that the world is God's creation and that whoever helps to preserve it is doing God's work. We who inherit a tradition that is marked by a reverence for life must preserve the earth and all its varied life for our own sake and for generations yet unborn. (Toxic Substances In The Environment, UAHC Resolution, November 1983, Houston, Texas.)

Issue

Pollutants and toxins in the environment cause dangers to children's health.

Background

Children are at infinitely greater risk for irreversible damage from toxic materials in the environment than adults, and the younger they are the higher the risk. The environmental dangers to children begin in the mother's womb: dangerous chemicals can move through the placenta from the woman into the bloodstream of the fetus.

From birth through childhood, the immune, nervous, respiratory and other physiological systems of infants and children mature and grow at a dramatically rapid rate. But while still immature, infants and young children are vulnerable to permanent damage to developing organ systems, particularly the nervous system, from chemical exposure. The environmental health safety standards developed by our regulatory system are based on data regarding healthy male adults and are not safe for children.

Children's developmental patterns include much play on the floor or outside, exposing them to toxic materials in carpets, dust and soil. These toxic materials include lead, which is a particular problem in older housing. The dangers of lead are not reduced with time; the lead and its residue must be removed. The blood of one in six U.S. children is found to have high lead levels. High levels can lead to attention deficits, decreased IQ scores, hyperactivity and other neurodevelopmental and cognitive problems. Although lead is no longer used in paint and gasoline, it remains a major hazard in poverty communities with older housing.

The technological and industrial developments of the 20th century have resulted in the discovery and use of countless new synthetic chemicals, many of which have caused pollution of the air we breathe and the water we drink or resulted in depletion of the ozone layer of the earth's atmosphere. Chemical plants have been described as having an extremely deleterious impact on those working in or living nearby and serious health problems have been associated with their use. In recent years some regulations and standards have been developed; nevertheless at this time the use of more than 70,000 chemicals is allowed, although little is known about their impact on the health of children. Research has been and is being conducted on children's exposure to neurotoxicants, the chemicals that lead to neurological problems. However, much research remains to be done, and in the interim protection is necessary.

In 1996, the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA), which makes the protection of children's health an overriding priority, was passed. It requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop regulations; setting pesticide safety levels based on the health needs of children not those of adult males. It also requires that a tenfold margin of safety be applied to the original pesticide regulation standards, unless "reliable data" demonstrate that the additional safety margin is not needed to safeguard children's health. In the "Regulatory Fairness and Openness Act of 1999" members of Congress sought to weaken FQPA by cutting important

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funding and preventing enforcement of regulations. Although this legislation had a high level of support, it was insufficient to bring the bill to a floor vote. Similar legislation may well be introduced in the current Congress.

Resolution

In reaffirmation of the Women of Reform Judaism commitment to the health and well being of all children and to a healthful environment, the WRJ Board of Directors resolves that WRJ will develop initiatives and support state and federal legislation to protect children by improving the environment. As an active partner in coalitions and interreligious campaigns to achieve these goals, WRJ will:

- 1) Inform and educate Sisterhood and congregation members about the dangers to children's health and well being caused by toxic materials in homes, schools and other buildings and likewise in the outside environment.
- 2) Urge Sisterhoods to become part of campaigns and coalition efforts to inform and empower families, parent groups and the public to:
 - Protect the health of children,
 - Document the effect of developmental toxins on children and
 - Develop and enact statewide initiatives and legislation to help prevent birth defects and assure healthy child development.
- 3) Call on Sisterhoods to support federal environmental legislation to protect children's health and well-being.
- 4) Advocate children's environmental health legislation, calling for research and protection of children's health, as urgent priorities for the national policy agenda.