Recent years have witnessed an increase both in respect for the environment and in concern about the hazards posed to the environment by the growth of modern society. Children’s health has benefitted from the heightened attention and expanded research and regulatory efforts directed toward identifying and ameliorating environmental hazards. For example, airborne levels of lead, a chemical which can cause illness and lower IQs in children, have dropped by 96% since 1975, thanks primarily to increased regulation. Yet, much more can be done to protect children from environmental health hazards, and there is reason to be concerned that pending legislation, designed to relax environmental safeguards enacted over the past decade, threatens progress in protecting children, and all age groups, from these hazards.

In this journal issue, the three articles following this introduction discuss the relationship between children’s health and the environment. The springboard for these articles was a national symposium, Preventing Child Exposures to Environmental Hazards: Research and Policy Issues, sponsored by the Children’s Environmental Health Network in March of 1994. This symposium brought together experts in research, policy, clinical practice, and advocacy to work toward establishing a national research and policy agenda for children’s environmental health. The full proceedings of the symposium are published in Environmental Health Perspectives, Supplement 4, 1995. The articles by Bearer and by Goldman originated in the symposium but have been substantially rewritten for publication in The Future of Children. The third article, by Landrigan and Carlson, was written especially for this journal issue and presents the policy context for actions to protect children from environmental hazards.
Although environmental hazards are of concern to all members of society regardless of age, several key issues are of particular importance to children’s health. First, despite the considerable activity over the past two decades to reduce environmental hazards, children continue to be exposed both to identified preventable environmental hazards and also presumably to many hazards which have yet to be identified. Second, children are at greater risk than adults for exposure to and illness from environmental hazards. The differences between the ways in which children and adults are affected by exposure to environmental hazards stem from differences in their physiology, behavior, and diet. Third, children may be inadequately protected from environmental hazards because no national research or policy agenda exists to address their unique vulnerabilities. The following three articles elaborate more fully on these key points and develop a number of recommendations for action to ameliorate the environmental hazards children face.

In the first article, Cynthia Bearer of Case Western Reserve University discusses the scientific basis for the differences between adults and children. She examines the physical and biological environments of developing children, and explores the consequences of those environments for children’s physical health. In the second article, Lynn Goldman of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency describes several case studies of the consequences of children’s exposure to pesticides. These articles underscore the differences between adults and children, the observation that children are exposed to and frequently inadequately protected from environmental toxins, and the fact that increased awareness and vigilance will be necessary before it is even possible to quantify the scope of the problem.

In the final article, Philip Landrigan of the Mount Sinai Medical Center and Joy Carlson of the Children’s Environmental Health Network discuss the policy context for children’s health and the environment. Despite the known dangers to children’s growth and development, American society has still not expressed a commitment to ensure that children will grow up in a safe environment and reach their full potential unhindered by toxins in air and food.

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Despite the progress that has been made in the past two decades in developing environmental safeguards, and the arguments presented in this journal issue and elsewhere which support strengthening activities that prevent child exposure to environmental hazards, existing environmental policies are being reconsidered. As this journal went to press, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate had passed or were considering multiple bills that could suspend nearly all new environmental regulations in the United States. The Regulatory Transition Act of 1995 (H.R. 450) would place a one-year moratorium on new federal environmental and public health regulations. The companion Senate legislation (S. 219) would create a 45-day period for congressional review of new federal regulations. (These differences will be resolved in conference committee.) The House-passed Risk Assessment and Cost Benefit Act of 1995 (originally introduced as H.R. 1022 and finally repackaged as a portion of H.R. 9) imposes new risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis requirements on future attempts to promulgate regulatory safeguards. In addition, the Senate is currently considering comparable legislation, the Comprehensive Regulatory Reform Act (S. 343) and other bills which would require strict cost-benefit and risk assessment analyses for all federal environmental regulations.

Existing environmental statutes also may be changed. The House has passed amendments (H.R. 961) that severely weaken the Clean Water Act and is considering legislation to weaken the regulatory strength of the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). In the opinion of some observers, these new requirements, if signed into law, would stifle efforts to protect the environment from toxins and, thus, have adverse effects on the health of children in this country.

Whether concern for children’s health plays an important role in the evaluation of environmental policy in this country is, at this point, an open question. Nonetheless, Landrigan and Carlson believe that “policymakers should consider the implications for human health and national productivity that may be associated with increased and unchecked exposure of America’s children to lead, air pollution, pesticides, and untested consumer chemicals of unknown toxicity. While short-term concerns about regulation of the business community certainly need to be heard, the immediate and longer-term effects of environmental degradation on the health of America’s children need to be weighed in the balance.”

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