

## MEDIA RELEASE

### Federal Government Action Needed Now to Protect Children from Hazardous Chemicals in Consumer Products

**16 December 2008:** A partnership of eleven environmental, public health, medical and child care groups is calling for improvements in the federal government's approach to regulating chemicals in consumer products. Improved regulation is one of three key areas identified in *First Steps in Lifelong Health: A Vision and Strategy for Children's Health and Environment in Canada*. The Vision and Strategy builds upon eight years of research and consultation by the **Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE)**.

"Products that we bring into our homes— from toys to furniture to cleaning products and electronics, from pesticides to air fresheners – too often contain substances that do or could disrupt the normal development of the brain and other organs of a fetus or child." says Dr. Lynn Marshall, a physician with the Environmental Health Clinic at Women's College Hospital. "Children are more vulnerable than adults to environmental contaminants because their bodies are undergoing rapid development and their behaviours – such as crawling on the floor and putting things in their mouths – put them in contact with contaminants found in the home, including many that are in ordinary house dust."

Research shows that many of those contaminants come from consumer products. The polybrominated flame retardants found in TVs and computers, the phthalates found in soft vinyl toys and many personal care products, and bisphenol A (BPA), the plastic additive found in the lining of food cans and in many rigid plastic containers, are among the chemicals targeted by CPCHE for urgent action.

CPCHE is recommending that the federal government improve its regulation of chemicals and secure the legislative power to issue mandatory recalls of products when problems are discovered. The partners are also calling on the government to empower parents with information via labeling and other means. "It is unacceptable that children continue to be put at risk from lead found in common consumer products, such as toys, key chains and costume jewelry," says Kathleen Cooper, senior researcher with the Canadian Environmental Law Association. "We have known for decades about the serious risk that lead poses to the brain and nervous system, yet the federal government still allows products containing lead to be marketed. If we can't get it right for lead, what actions can we expect with all the other chemicals that scientists are increasingly linking to health effects?"

There is much to learn about the risks posed by thousands of chemicals that are in commerce today – most of which have not been tested for their potential to adversely affect the developing fetus and child. "But lack of full scientific certainty is no excuse for inaction." says Barbara McElgunn, Health Policy Advisor with the Learning

Disabilities Association of Canada. “When it comes to the health and development of children, it is better to be safe than sorry. CPCHE is calling on the federal government to take precautionary action to reduce children’s exposures to chemicals that are known or reasonably suspected to pose health risks.” CPCHE is also calling for more research on how chronic exposure to environmental contaminants may be contributing to worrisome trends in child health in Canada and other industrialized countries, including rising rates of asthma, learning disabilities and other developmental challenges.

CPCHE’s *First Steps in Lifelong Health* is a comprehensive blueprint for protecting children’s environmental health in Canada. “The list is long. There is much to do. But the public is increasingly aware of the need to reduce children’s exposures to toxic chemicals, and governments are starting to respond.” says Erica Phipps, Partnership Director for CPCHE. “The CPCHE partners look forward to working with governments and other stakeholders to build on that momentum.”

*First Steps in Lifelong Health: A Vision and Strategy for Children’s Health and Environment* is available on the CPCHE website, in English and French, at [www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca](http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca)

CPCHE will present *First Steps in Lifelong Health* to the media in a **press conference at 10:00 AM EST, Tuesday, 16 December**, at the Ontario College of Family Physicians, 357 Bay Street (mezzanine), Toronto. Refreshments provided.

To mark the occasion of the release of *First Steps in Lifelong Health*, CPCHE and Pollution Probe will host an **Evening Public Forum on Protecting Our Children from Toxic Chemicals in the Environment and in Consumer Products, Tuesday, 16 December 2008, 7-9 pm**, at the Marriott Toronto Downtown Eaton Centre, 525 Bay Street (Yonge and Dundas subway), Toronto. Distinguished speakers include the Ontario Minister of the Environment, the Director General of Health Canada’s Consumer Product Safety Program, and the Editor-in-Chief of *Today’s Parent* magazine (see agenda, attached). Free admission; no registration required.

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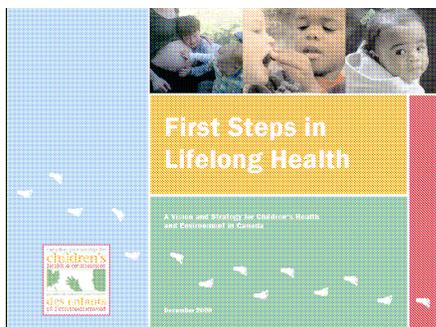
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CPCHE PARTNERS





## BACKGROUND

### *First Steps in Lifelong Health: A Vision and Strategy for Children's Health and Environment in Canada*

Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and  
Environment (CPCHE)

16 December 2008

#### **Why is CPCHE concerned about environmental threats to child health and development?**

- Children are more vulnerable than adults to environmental threats due to differences in size, behaviour (e.g., crawling, mouthing objects, active play), and their proportionally higher intake of air, water and food, and because their organs and detoxification systems are not fully developed (see pp. 6-7 of *First Steps in Lifelong Health*).
- Some childhood disorders are on the rise, including asthma, learning and behavioural disorders and obesity (see pp. 8-9). Environmental exposures are one of a number of contributing factors associated with these health outcomes. Certain cancers are on the rise among young adults, raising concerns about early-life exposure to carcinogens.
- While some positive steps are being taken by governments, more needs to be done to reduce fetal and childhood exposures to potentially harmful chemicals in homes, schools and community environments, and via consumer products.

#### **Why is CPCHE calling for urgent federal government action on toxic chemicals in consumer products?**

- Many chemicals have not been adequately evaluated for safety and are not regulated. Scientific knowledge of the health effects of many chemicals – particularly on child health and development – is weak or absent.
- Children spend up to 90 percent of their time indoors, where they are exposed to a multitude of chemicals found in everyday consumer products, including chemicals known to harm the developing fetus and child (e.g., lead, mercury) as well as those for which scientific evidence of harm is emerging (e.g., phthalates, polybrominated flame retardants, bisphenol A).
- Recent studies, as well as early results from the Canadian House Dust Study, confirm that significant amounts of contaminants in consumer products end up in house dust, creating exposures of particular concern for young children who have frequent hand-to-mouth activity and spend lots of time on the floor.

- Canada's legislative and regulatory system is not well equipped to *prevent* adverse health effects from chemicals in consumer products. Without the power to issue mandatory product recalls, the ability to respond when problems arise is limited.

**What actions is CPCHE urging the federal government to take to improve consumer product safety?**

- Create a **comprehensive consumer product regulatory scheme** that:
  - places **tighter controls** on the use of hazardous chemicals in consumer products and the import of products containing hazardous chemicals;
  - requires **labeling** of product ingredients and gives the public information on associated health effects; and
  - gives the federal government the power to issue **mandatory product recalls**.
- Immediately ban the sale of consumer products containing non-essential **lead** and **mercury**, in light of the well-documented harm that these substances cause to children's developing brains (see Box 17, p. 22).
- Ban the sale of children's products containing **phthalates**, following the lead of Europe and the United States (see Box 20, p. 24). Phthalates are synthetic plasticizers used in a wide variety of products, including vinyl and many personal care and cleaning products, and have been linked to developmental impacts and cancer. Canada remains far behind leading countries with its proposed ban on only a single phthalate (DEHP) in children's products.
- Ban the manufacture, import, use and sale of *all* **polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs)** and PBDE-containing products. PBDEs are chemicals associated with reproductive and other health effects. They are used as flame retardants in electronics and other consumer products. While Canada has declared PBDEs toxic under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA), the ban applies only to PBDEs voluntarily phased out in 2004. Deca-BDE is still in widespread and increasing use in Canada (see Box 19, pp. 23-24).
- Significantly reduce exposures to hazardous **volatile organic compounds (VOCs)** from consumer products by requiring manufacturers to substitute them with safer alternatives.

**What must Canada do to achieve a more precautionary approach to protecting the developing fetus and child from toxic chemicals in the environment and consumer products?**

- **Reverse the burden of proof** so that the producer or importer of a chemical has to provide governmental evaluators with sufficient data to support a claim of acceptable risk before gaining or retaining access to the marketplace.

- **Require that chemicals be tested for potential effects on fetal/child development**, including effects on the developing brain and nervous system (see Box 11, p. 18).
- Adopt the **substitution principle** to require that hazardous chemicals be replaced with safer alternatives, wherever possible.
- Ensure **transparency** in regulatory decision-making and promote the **public’s right-to-know** by increasing public access to information on chemicals and pollutants.

**What is longitudinal cohort research and why is CPCHE recommending increased government support for it?**

- Longitudinal cohort research involves tracking various determinants of health (e.g., socio-economic status, environmental exposures, diet) along with health outcomes in a group or “cohort” of individuals over time. Such research is essential for attaining a better understanding of how environment and other factors affect health and development. The United States has embarked on an ambitious longitudinal cohort study called the U.S. National Children’s Study. CPCHE notes that longitudinal research was among the top five recommendations of the federal Minister of Health’s Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth, Dr. Kellie Leitch (see Box 8, p. 14).
- In addition to urging greater overall investment in longitudinal research, CPCHE is calling on the federal government to approve funding to expand the Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals (MIREC) study so that the health of the babies born to participating mothers is tracked and evaluated over time (see Box 10, pp. 16-17).

**What other actions are needed to strengthen children’s environmental health research in Canada?**

- CPCHE is calling on the federal government to establish a long-term national research agenda to address gaps in knowledge on how chemicals affect the developing fetus and child (see action step 1, p. 13).
- There is also a need to significantly expand educational, training and career opportunities for researchers in a range of disciplines.
- Canada must build on recent progress in gathering biomonitoring data through the Canadian Health Measures Survey by investing in increased surveillance and tracking of environmental hazards, children’s exposures and health outcomes at both the federal and provincial/territorial levels.

**What role can parents, caregivers, health professionals and others take in safeguarding children's environmental health?**

- Many people are involved in decisions that affect the quality of children's indoor and outdoor environments, including parents and caregivers, doctors, public health nurses, teachers, urban planners, community leaders, retail sales people and many others. They must be empowered through increased education and training on environment-health interactions and preventive strategies. Efforts must be expanded to provide information to parents and caregivers that enables them to make informed choices (e.g., through labeling, outreach and other means).
- Health professionals have especially vital roles to play, as they are often the most trusted source of information and advice to the public on how to protect children from environmental health risks. However, they often lack the training, education and other supports needed to effectively play this role (see Boxes 23-25, pp. 29-31)

**How does Canada compare to other countries when it comes to protecting children's health from toxic chemicals in the environment and in consumer products?**

- Canada took a world-leading step with its work on categorization of the entire CEPA Domestic Substances List (see Box 7, p. 10), which has resulted in a set of priorities. Much more needs to be done, however, to achieve tangible results that ensure a truly precautionary and preventive approach to children's environmental health protection in Canada.
- Canada too often lags behind other jurisdictions, such as the United States and the European Union, in acting on toxic substances to which children are routinely exposed, such as PBDEs, phthalates and lead (see Boxes 19 and 20, pp. 23-24). Admirably, Canada is the first country to say it will act on bisphenol-A with a proposed ban on its use in baby bottles, but the action is too limited in scope. Since fetal exposure to BPA is likely of greatest concern, a more comprehensive approach is needed to control BPA in all food and drink containers, to reduce maternal exposure..
- Despite having declared both lead and mercury toxic under the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, products readily available to children are still too frequently found to contain these potent neurotoxicants.

## What positive developments on children's environmental health protection and chemicals management are happening in Canada?

- CPCHE believes there are encouraging signs of progress at the federal, provincial and local levels of government, as well as some progressive actions by individuals and organizations outside of government (see Box 7, pp. 10-11 for examples).
- Public awareness of the risks that may be posed by toxic chemicals in consumer products and the environment has risen dramatically, spiked by large-scale recalls of lead-contaminated toys and the announced ban on plastic baby bottles containing bisphenol A. CPCHE partners believe that Canada has an opportunity to address public concern by building a proactive and world-leading national strategy to protect the fetus and child from threats posed by hazardous chemicals and pollutants.

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### Additional resources:

The following resources produced by CPCHE partners provide additional information on children's environmental health issues and are available on the CPCHE website at [www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca](http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca):

- Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, 2005. ***Child Health and the Environment – A Primer.***  
*Provides a comprehensive overview of children's environmental health issues, including why children are more vulnerable to environmental threats, health effects and exposures of concern, what is being done in Canada, and "childproofing" tips for parents and caregivers.*
- Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment/Pollution Probe, 2008. ***Report of the National Policy Consultation: Building a Dialogue Towards a National Strategy for Children's Health and Environment in Canada.***  
*Combined backgrounder and summary of outcomes of the 2007 cross-Canada workshop series on children's environmental health convened by CPCHE and Pollution Probe.*
- Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment, 2007. ***A Father's Day Report – Men, Boys and Environmental Health Threats.***  
*Summarizes the disproportionate health effects, thought to be linked to environmental contaminants, affecting the male fetus and child.*
- Toronto Public Health, 2005. ***Environmental Threats to Children: Understanding the Risks, Enabling Prevention.***  
*Comprehensive summary of scientific evidence of environmental threats to child health, including recommendations.*

## **CPCHE Partners:**

Following are the eleven CPCHE partner organizations and principal/media contacts.

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## An Evening Public Forum on

# Protecting Our Children from Toxic Chemicals in the Environment and in Consumer Products

**Tuesday, 16 December 2008, 7:00 – 9:00 pm**  
Marriott Downtown Eaton Centre Hotel, Grand Ballrooms A and B  
525 Bay Street, Toronto (Yonge and Dundas Subway)

### Agenda

- 6:30 pm Refreshments
- 7:00 pm **Opening and Welcome** – Bob Oliver, Executive Director, Pollution Probe
- 7:05 pm **Keynote Address** – The Honourable John Gerretsen, Ontario Minister of the Environment
- 7:20 pm **CPCHE's Vision and Strategy for Children's Health and Environment in Canada** – Erica Phipps, Partnership Director, Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment
- On the day of its public release, participants will have an opportunity to learn about and discuss this comprehensive call to action to better protect the developing fetus and child from hazardous chemicals in the environment and in consumer products in Canada.*
- 7:35 pm **Health Canada's Approach to Protecting Children's Health from Toxic Chemicals in Consumer Products** – Charles Ethier, Director General, Product Safety Program, Health Canada
- 7:45 pm **Panel Presentations** – Moderator: Caroline Connell, Editor-in-Chief, *Today's Parent*
- **Health Implications of Toxic chemicals in the Womb and During Childhood: A Physician's Perspective** – Dr. Lynn Marshall, Environmental Health Clinic– Women's College Hospital; Environmental Health Committee, Ontario College of Family Physicians; Environmental Health Institute of Canada
  - **Lead and Mercury: Why are Children in Canada Still at Risk?** – Kathleen Cooper, Canadian Environmental Law Association
- 8:00 pm **Questions and Answers**
- 8:40 pm **Otesha Youth Group**
- 9:00 pm **Closing Remarks and Adjourn** – Bob Oliver, Executive Director, Pollution Probe