

# Safe Environments

**D**espite the great strides being made in other areas of children's health, children continue to be threatened by their environments – including day-to-day safety issues and the health impact of environmental conditions on children's growing bodies.

## Challenge

With more than 40 per cent of deaths among toddlers and preschoolers due to injury and 47 per cent of childhood injuries occurring in the home, CICH recognized the need to address this important issue at home and in the community.

## CICH action and impact

In 1981 and 1991, CICH organized national symposiums on injury prevention that analysed national data and discussed injury prevention initiatives, including the use of child restraints, bicycle helmets and poison control.

CICH is a leader in promoting the use of car seats and bicycle helmets. One such initiative, The Bike Helmet Resource Kit, contains videos, posters and a community campaign manual to encourage children and adults to wear helmets.

Active/Safe Routes to School assessed the impact of the growing trend of parents driving children to school. These impacts include reduced physical activity for children, increased chances of traffic-related injuries and increased air pollution from idling cars. The project resulted in an increase in the number of children walking to school in large, supervised groups known as "walking school buses."

The Canadian Coalition on Childhood Injury Prevention resulted in an increase in the use of car seat restraints and safety equipment, such as bicycle helmets. These standards have led to a reduction in child deaths resulting from automobile accidents and a decline in the severity of injuries due to bicycle accidents. CICH was also the driving force behind developing standards regarding the flammability of children's pyjamas.

## Challenge

Some 50,000 to 60,000 chemicals are in use today in Canada, and each year many more new chemicals are introduced. The health effects of these chemicals are not known. Chemicals in our environment may pose a significant threat to the health of Canada's children,

since children are more likely than adults to develop serious health problems from contaminants in food, air and water.

## CICH action and impact

To understand the impact of the environment on children, CICH hosted the first national meeting on Environmental Contaminants and Children's Health (1997), building awareness of key environmental problems affecting children and setting in motion efforts to protect children's health – projects still ongoing today.

Translating evidence into action, CICH was a key member of the coalition that resulted in lead-free gasoline in Canada and a reduction in the level of lead found in paint. The Institute's efforts also contributed to policies to limit the cosmetic use of pesticides. CICH has worked towards the anticipated 2004 phase-out of arsenic-laden pressure-treated

wood and was a leading proponent of ending the use of toxic phthalates in soft plastic toys in Canada. The "Precautionary Principle," which articulates the notion that protective action should be taken when health is threatened (even when scientific knowledge is incomplete), is being incorporated into some legislation and discussed by industry associations.

The Institute has reached out to parents and caregivers through a number of programs. Changing Habits: Changing Climate is a pioneer project that demonstrates the effects of climate change on children's health. The results showed that children are more vulnerable than other populations to the dangers of severe weather events, hotter and longer heat waves, and more polluted air and water. CICH published a foundation analysis, fact sheets and a brochure that explains to parents how they can reduce their contribution to climate change and better protect children from climate-related concerns. Over 500,000

brochures have been distributed to date. Using our knowledge of environmental hazards, we created the Healthy Spaces for Healthy Development initiative, an interactive, web-based program that helps caregivers ensure spaces are child-friendly and environmentally safe.

CICH is also the environmental health affiliate for the Canadian Health Network, providing leadership and expertise in the area of environmental health, and responding to health information requests from consumers and health intermediaries.

