

Responding to the Impact of Climate Change on Children

IPA Statement

Children worldwide are demanding their views on climate change be heard, a right guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. They have reason to be concerned—the 2019 Lancet Countdown and multiple other publications document the profound vulnerability of infants and children to the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on their health and well-being.

Child health professionals must follow the lead of the world's youth and develop long-term relationships with them as we collaboratively respond to the existential threats of the climate crisis on children. No profession will bear witness to the effects of climate change on children to the extent of pediatricians. We are uniquely positioned to engage with other health professionals and child advocates in developing comprehensive strategies to prevent and mitigate the impact of the global climate crisis on children and youth. We resolve to take the necessary actions to achieve an equitable and just transition to a sustainable planet for all children.

Toward these ends:

Whereas, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's fourth assessment report concluded the Earth is undergoing adverse global climate change and that man-made contributions are significant; and

Whereas, climate changes have created conditions that affect public health, with disproportionate effects on certain life stages and circumstances, in particular children and those living in poverty and low income countries; and

Whereas, children are particularly vulnerable because their bodies are growing and developing, they have unique behaviors and interactions with their environment, and they must rely on parents and caregivers to provide for their basic needs; and

Whereas, climate change will affect children's health as a result of their exposure to elevated temperatures; more frequent, severe, or longer-lasting extreme weather events; increasing transmission rates of food, water, and vector-borne diseases; increasing rates of mycotoxin-related illnesses; increases in air pollution from molds, pollens, and the burning of fossil fuels; and mental health stressors; and

Whereas, displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and conflicts arising from competition for water, food and other resources will increasingly impact children's health, mental health, and well-being; and

Whereas, conflict is not only a consequence of climate change (competing for dwindling resources), but is also a primary driver of the exploitation of natural resources to produce

military hardware and transport it; and

Whereas, the digitization of our world consumes vast amounts of energy; and
Whereas, children experience different mental health effects than adults during and after disasters—that vary based on their developmental stage and level of cognitive and emotional maturity; and

Whereas, the effects of climate change on mental health among children have been reviewed, and researchers have called for identification of “...ways to fortify the societal structures necessary for mental health that climate change threatens to erode”;

Therefore be it resolved, that regional, national, and international pediatric organizations—together with multidisciplinary child health professionals, child advocates, youth, and families—commit to work individually and collectively to minimize the use of fossil fuels, decrease global carbon emissions, mitigate the impact of climate change on children, and achieve climate justice in an ecologically grounded and sustainable world, such that, in unison they/we:

Advocate for:

- Local, national, and international policies and strategies that rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ensure preparedness for climate-associated extreme weather events
- Sustainable and renewable electricity-generating systems, accessible transportation, plant-based food, and equitable access to green spaces that improve the lives of children and families
- Sustainable, carbon neutral housing, and upgrading of existing housing stock as a means of reducing childhood respiratory conditions
- Basic energy-saving strategies in homes, schools, hospitals, the workplace, etc.
- Electric vehicles, “fueled” by sustainable energy sources, as a means of reducing air pollution
- Principles of sustainable development
- Advancing and supporting children’s own advocacy and mitigation endeavors on the climate crisis
- Engaging clinical and non-clinical staff in practices, hospitals, and health systems; and children, youth, and patients’ families, as advocates. Work to reduce the carbon and environmental footprint of health facilities—including strategies to increase energy efficiency, incorporate renewable energy sources, and reduce waste.

Promote education:

- Of child health professionals at all levels of training and in all venues of practice, on all aspects of the climate crisis, including: a) the science of climate change, b) the direct and indirect impact of climate change on child health and well-being, c) strategies for mitigating carbon emissions, d) approaches to preventing and responding to the impact

of climate change on children's physical and mental health, and e) how to be an effective child advocate

- Of children and families on climate change and its impact on child health and well-being, in clinical practice and health venues (offices, clinics, hospitals), schools, civil society, and other places where children and adults live and learn
- Of elected officials on the risks climate change pose to child health; speak at public hearings; and provide expert testimony. Help educate the public through letters to the editor and community engagement. Advance and fulfill targets for CO₂ reduction by pediatric societies.
- Of communities, including professionals and non-professionals of all ages, about how to advocate individually and collectively and work with children to raise awareness and respond to the climate crisis
- About integrative and collaborative movements, such as One Health, Planetary Health, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which identify the root civil-political, social, economic, cultural, ecological, and philosophical causes of climate change. And, with this knowledge, provide strategies to maintain resilient ecosystems, protect biodiversity, cultivate inter-species justice, and advance human rights, equity, and social justice.

As international and national child health professional organizations and individual pediatricians:

- Use the framework of anticipatory guidance at office visits for discussing climate change with families. Serve as personal role models for practices that promote environmental sustainability
- Develop and disseminate strategies and tools to ensure child health professionals have the capacity to translate the ecological elements of whole child health, which include the need for clean air and water, nutritious food, access to parks and green spaces, etc. into practice.
- Reduce the carbon footprint associated with professional meetings, including reducing flying; contracting with "Green" facilities and organizations; offering primarily vegetarian, climate-conscious, and locally sourced meals, etc.
- End sponsorship of pediatric meetings by formula and baby food industries and promote breast feeding, which is more environmentally friendly than the production of formula and processed foods
- Stop the commercial exploitation of children and mitigate its impact on consumerism across the life course
- Refuse sponsorship of pediatric meetings by the fossil fuel industry
- Collaborate with health departments, academic institutions, research facilities, and activist groups to enhance surveillance, analysis, and reporting of climate-sensitive health effects on children
- Address the harm and manage the damage currently occurring secondary to the impact of climate change, including support for families displaced due to climate change, better

health services and access to treatment of vector borne illnesses and heat stroke, expanded vaccine access, better housing structures, etc.

- Participate in and advance research on effects of climate change on child health inequities, and catalyze transformative actions that translate this research into practice
- Strengthen disaster preparedness, in particular as it relates to children and youth. Purchase local and recycled goods, and avoid disposable products
- Advance reproductive rights of individuals and families.

As human induced climate changes impact children and youth, child health professionals, societies, and organizations must acknowledge the global climate crisis as an existential and universal threat to children's health and well-being. They must proceed forcefully as individuals and jointly as organizations and societies to prevent, mitigate, and decisively correct this impact and fulfil the rights of children to optimal survival and development.

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