

## A Message from Toronto's Medical Officer of Health

As a society, we create the environment in which our children develop and grow. Over time, we have altered that environment in important ways. Our protective ozone layer is damaged, greenhouse gas emissions are still on the rise and climate change has set in. Our dependence on burning fossil fuels for heating, power production and transportation worsens our smog problems, and our reliance on consumer products containing persistent, toxic compounds brings these substances into our homes.



From the very beginning of their lives, children are routinely exposed to many different substances. Because they have immature and underdeveloped organs, their bodies take in and absorb more chemical contaminants than adults and are less able to withstand the harmful effects. From conception through to the end of adolescence, there are many “windows of vulnerability” where toxic exposures can lead to permanent, lifelong impacts. When testing is done, traces of many chemicals are detected in the tissues and fluids of children. However, our knowledge of the consequences of exposure to most of these chemicals is disturbingly inadequate.

In urban centres like Toronto, children are exposed to a wide variety of potentially hazardous agents in the air, water, food, soil and built environment. New research studies provide evidence that children’s health is put at risk from these exposures as health problems that originate in the environment are identified.

When risks to human health are uncertain or not clearly measured, the wisest course of action is to reduce exposure as far as can be achieved, rather than incurring a risk that may prove unacceptable in the long run. Many solutions are within our grasp. Better protection for children’s environmental health can come from three main strategies. We can:

- do more research to improve our understanding of the risks to children
- advocate for policies and regulations that are inherently protective of child health
- educate parents, parents-to-be and everyone with responsibility for children’s well-being, about risks to health and ways of minimizing these risks.

It is often said that “children are our future”. But what kind of future are we giving them? Children give us their trust. We are their custodians and we need to ensure their natural and built world provides a safe and healthy environment where their bodies and minds develop to the fullest potential. This is the key to a healthier future for all of us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D. McKeown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Dr. David McKeown  
Medical Officer of Health