



Happy National Public Health Week! During the first full week of April, APHA celebrates NPHW to recognize the contributions of public health and highlight issues that are important to improving our nation's health. As part of the movement to create the healthiest nation in one generation, we are celebrating with the theme is [Healthiest Nation 2030: Changing Our Future Together](#).

Environmental health is a vital part of achieving success on this ambitious goal, and so we've devoted a whole day, April 4, of NPHW to highlighting [environmental health issues](#).

Environmental health is a key part of any comprehensive public health system. The field works to advance policies and programs to reduce chemical and other environmental exposures in air, water, soil and food to protect people and provide communities with healthier environments.

Children are often the most vulnerable population to experience the consequences of inadequate or unresponsive environmental public health systems. For their size, they breathe more air and eat more food than adults, which makes them particularly vulnerable to environmental public health hazards. Furthermore, while all communities experience the consequences of environmental contaminants, communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted. Children of color and children living in poverty bear a high burden of lead exposures, lead toxicity and other environmental hazards.

Mounting research shows that by significantly reducing or eliminating children's exposures to harmful toxicants, we can prevent and--in some cases--reverse some negative health effects, and reduce morbidity overall. Children's health and safety need to be considered across all settings where they spend time, not just within and around their homes. The American Public Health Association calls for the [establishment of environmental public health systems for children at risk or with environmental exposures in schools](#). Our colleagues at the [Healthy Schools Network](#) have been championing this very important effort for many years. But what about our youngest and most vulnerable children?

Over 60% (approximately 11-15 million) of children in the U.S. under the age of 6 attend some form of early learning or care program, whether center-based or family/home-based.

Child care licensing, and the development of regulatory standards that address the health and safety of child care facilities, are primarily handled at the state level. Some aspects of licensing, permitting and oversight happen at municipal and federal (for federally funded programs) levels as well. However, in most states sources of environmental risks in child care settings [are not comprehensively addressed](#). In addition, many children throughout the country, especially in low income rural areas and in Hispanic/Latino and American Indian and Alaska Native communities,

attend unlicensed child care programs which are not bound to inspection nor held to state and local public health and safety requirements.

Thus, it is critical that all child care professionals and providers receive education focused on children's environmental health and training on risk reduction and prevention. There is room for more and improved curricula addressing these issues within formal and continuing child care professional development, and especially for more targeted education to family and unlicensed providers. Progress is underway via non-regulatory fronts. Two of the largest national child care accreditation organizations have incorporated stronger environmental health criteria into their standards, and a couple of states have added environmental health criteria to their Quality Rating Improvement Programs or Systems.

While promotion of model, voluntary policies and best practices within and between states and individual providers is helpful, to truly effect change, regulatory and licensing officials need to codify environmental health policies for child care programs. As states update their child care health and safety standards and licensing regulations, they should consult [\*Caring for Our Children: Environmental Health in Early Care and Education\*](#), a compilation of 123 nationally recognized health and safety standards that have the greatest impact on environmental health in early care and education settings. Standards include best policies for many domains within a child care program, including: cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting practices; toy, furniture, and other product purchasing; identification and management of sources of lead exposure; pest management and control; and more. This collection is a subset of materials available in *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition (CFOC3)*. CFOC3 is developed and published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Public Health Association, and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education.

If we really want to see progress in reducing disease and creating the healthiest nation in one generation, early intervention, specifically focusing on children and where they spend their time, is essential. Our youngest children should be safe, even when they are not at home. In child care settings across the country, all children should have access to clean air and water, safe food and toys, and healthier spaces within which to grow, learn, and play.