



Healthy Environments for Learning Day

Healthy Places, Sustainable Spaces

Everyday actions for healthy and sustainable learning environments



By **Gillian Petri**

A PRIMARY CLASSROOM FULL of toys and art materials, a middle school outdoor field trip to nearby nature, a child care program where lunch is being served — all these settings have an impact on children’s well-being. The environments where children learn, play, and grow influence children’s overall health and well-being. In fact, they can affect a child’s health trajectory for life. Many children spend six or more hours within education settings, whether a school, child care program, or other early learning environment, so it is critical that the quality of these settings is optimal.

The location and design of the physical space, as well as the practices that are used within a learning environment, can all have an impact on children’s health, in positive or negative ways. Time spent in healthy and nurturing environments — which include access to nearby nature and culturally safe, inclusive spaces — can contribute in positive ways to a child’s development and well-being. Nature-based learning and programs that connect children to the land benefit physical, social, emotional, mental, and ecological

health, fostering values of stewardship. Conversely, time spent in conditions which are unhealthy, including poor air quality; pesticide use; toxic substances in cleaning products, toys, and furnishings, are harmful to children’s development and can contribute to a variety of adverse health outcomes.

Every child has a right to healthy and sustainable learning environments. However, disparities continue across Canada in children’s levels of exposure to pollution and toxic chemicals as a result of colonial oppression, socio-economic marginalization, and other determinants of health inequity. Addressing these inequities and prioritizing children’s environmental health for all children is imperative.

Promoting healthy and sustainable learning environments

The Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment (CPCHE) is actively working with our partners, affiliates, and collaborators to promote children’s environmental health and reduce health inequities. For decades, CPCHE has worked to increase awareness, mobilize knowledge, and catalyze action to ensure that all children in Canada have healthy environments in which to live,

learn, play, and grow. One of CPCHE's key initiatives is the annual Healthy Environments for Learning Day campaign. Healthy Environments for Learning Day (HELD), formerly known as Healthy Schools Day, aims to raise awareness of and encourage action to prevent environmental health risks to children in early learning environments and schools. Recent campaigns have addressed [radon](#), [diesel bus emissions](#) and [climate change](#). The 2022 campaign highlights the issues and gaps in environmental health specifically within child care settings in Canada and amplifies the opportunities to collectively work toward a vision for healthy and sustainable learning environments that support the well-being of children and staff. Key elements of the campaign included the launch of the [CPCHE Child Care Checklist and Resource Hub](#), a [national survey](#) of child care practitioners on environmental health in child care settings, and the co-creation of [national vision statement](#) together with more than 45 organizations across the country.

Everyday actions for healthy, sustainable learning environments

Have you considered the environmental health of the learning spaces in which you work? Ever wondered about potential sources of toxic exposures in the toys, furnishings, and cleaners used in your classroom or play space? Have you wished there were ways to promote the health of children and staff? As part of this year's HELD campaign, CPCHE created and launched an [online resource](#) that can help to answer these questions and more. This [resource](#) includes a checklist of 102 questions based on nine environmental-health topic areas. The topic areas include air quality; outdoor learning and play; indoor learning and play; sun safety; cleaning and disinfecting; kitchen and food preparation; facility maintenance and office administration; sustainability; as well as inclusivity, equity, and accessibility. Aligned with these topic areas is a corresponding resource hub that explains the nature of the concern, offers tips on everyday actions for implementing change, and provides links to relevant resources for those wishing to explore topics further. While this resource is geared to child care settings, the information and actions suggested can be translated to any learning environment.

The following highlights the nine topic areas found in the CPCHE Child Care Checklist and resource hub, why these are of critical importance to promoting children's health and well-being, and some ideas for action.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Air Quality

Why is this important?

Both outdoor and indoor air quality can impact children's health. Outdoors, air pollution from traffic, idling vehicles, dry cleaners, gas stations, factories, refineries, and other industrial facilities are all examples of sources of pollution and toxic chemical emissions that can pose risks to children's health. Indoors, various factors, such as mold exposure and lack of ventilation, can cause unhealthy indoor air concentrations of some pollutants, which can be higher than those found in outdoor air.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Ensure good ventilation with fresh air exchange.
- Prevent and promptly address mold issues.
- Conduct a radon test.
- Minimize outdoor air pollution exposures (e.g., implementing a no idling policy).
- Check the Air Quality Healthy Index (AQHI) daily with the [WeatherCan APP](#).

Healthy Environments for Learning: Outdoor Learning and Play

Why is this important?

Spending time outdoors daily is an important part of school and child care programs and can contribute to improved physical and mental health, as well as foster children's connections to play and values of stewardship. While spending time outside, it is important to take precautions to reduce any toxic exposures.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Access nearby nature and healthy green spaces as much as possible.
- Minimize exposure to insect bites by taking preventative measures.
- Reduce exposure to chemically treated wood.
- Reduce pesticides or other harmful chemicals used on lawns and other outdoor spaces.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Indoor Learning and Play

Why is this important?

Toys, arts, and crafts materials and furnishings are integral parts of indoor learning and play, enhancing children's experiences and overall development. To prevent inadvertent exposures to toxic substances, attention must be paid to what toys, craft materials, and furnishings are made of, and whether they have been treated or coated with substances that may be harmful.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Choose healthy and sustainable materials for toys, when possible (e.g., moving away from plastic toys).
- Check regularly for product recalls on all toys, play equipment, furniture, and accessories.
- Choose non-toxic arts and crafts supplies.
- Choose furnishings made of natural materials.

Healthy Environments for Learning Spotlight: Sun Safety and Extreme Heat

Why is this important?

Outdoor activity, including time spent outdoors, is important for children's physical fitness and lifelong health. Although sun exposure plays a vital role in ensuring adequate vitamin D production, protecting children from overexposure to the sun is essential for avoiding damage to the skin and future skin cancer risk. With climate change, extreme heat events are becoming more frequent and more intense. Exposure to extreme heat, and heat-related illnesses are especially dangerous for infants and young children.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Reduce sun exposure, especially during peak hours.
- Ensure adequate shade is available.
- Encourage children to wear protective clothing (e.g., sun hats; light, loose clothing).
- Ensure adequate hydration.
- Use approved sunscreen with at least 30 SPF and apply properly.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Cleaning and Disinfecting

Why is this important?

Infection prevention and control is essential in environments where children spend time together. Young children transmit infections in any group setting by doing what comes naturally to them — sharing utensils, playing closely, holding hands, and sometimes forgetting to wash their hands. Maintaining a clean environment is critical, and facilitators should be mindful of optimizing health benefits while being attentive to health and sustainability.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Practice proper hand hygiene, regularly washing with warm water and regular (not antibacterial) soap.
- Avoid using cleaners and disinfecting/sanitizing chemicals in close proximity to children.
- Use less toxic and fragrance-free cleaning and laundry products.
- Follow guidance from your local public health authority.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Kitchen and Food Preparation

Why is this important?

The food we eat and the water we drink nourish and replenish our bodies. Precautions should be taken to ensure that our food choices, food preparation, and food serving practices minimize any potential toxic exposures. Drinking water in some areas may contain tiny quantities of lead. Even in small amounts, lead exposure can harm the developing brain.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Test water for lead and, if warranted, routinely flush water lines to reduce lead levels in drinking water.
- Opt for non-plastic containers for heating food or drinks; if serving in plastic containers, wait until the food or beverage has cooled before transferring into plastic serving and storage containers.
- Serve fresh and frozen foods (rather than canned foods) whenever possible.
- Choose low-mercury fish.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Facility Maintenance and Office Administration

Why is this important?

Regular equipment servicing and maintenance as well as regular facility checks help support a healthy environment

for all children and staff. When undergoing renovations, there can be opportunities for creating healthier indoor environments by choosing safer materials and products, and by including energy-efficient measures. At the same time, renovations can release harmful vapors, dust, asbestos, mineral fibers, lead from old paint, and mold. Another area to implement sustainable practices is with administrative and office tasks, as sometimes there may be unnecessary waste and reliance on resources such as paper.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- [Renovate Right](#), in ways that reduce any harmful exposures to staff and children while making choices that enhance a setting's efficiency and overall health.
- Consider including energy-efficient measures in renovations and repair activities.
- Implement administrative practices that reduce waste (e.g., emailing vs. using paper handouts).

Healthy Environments for Learning: Sustainability and Climate Action

Why is this important?

Climate change is presenting real and immediate risks to communities around the world, and North Americans are not immune to these risks. Heat-related health impacts, deteriorating air quality, vector-borne diseases, extreme weather events, increased eco-anxiety, and food insecurity have all been associated with climate change. Sustainable practices and climate actions in schools and child care settings can help mitigate the impacts of climate change and model best practices for children and families.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Implement conservation practices for water and energy use.
- Choose non-disposable and non-plastic options when purchasing supplies, whenever possible.
- Participate in green initiatives such as gardening, tree planting, or depaving outdoor spaces.
- Buy local foods and organic, when possible; opt for plant-based meals in menu planning.
- Engage in active and sustainable transportation initiatives.

Healthy Environments for Learning: Inclusivity

Why is this important?

Children are likely to live and learn with people who may be very different from them. To prepare children for life in a diverse society and to promote equity and inclusion, families and educators should encourage children's positive feelings about themselves while fostering an understanding and acceptance of others. Taking actions to create welcoming, culturally engaging, safe spaces for all children is necessary for fostering inclusive environments.

What are some everyday actions that can be implemented?

- Use gender-neutral language.
- Have books and toys that reflect and celebrate diversity.

- Create accessible spaces.
- Learn about the territory you are on and the people who steward the land.
- Help mitigate socio-economic and other barriers within your program so all children can participate.

Healthy and sustainable learning environments for every child

Our collective efforts can ensure that every child learns, plays, and grows in environments that are healthy and sustainable. CPCHE and our HELD partners continue to advocate for healthy and sustainable learning environments. We invite you to get involved by implementing everyday actions; checking out the [Healthy Environments for Learning Day website](#); and following and sharing HELD social media on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#). Together we can realize a shared vision of learning environments across the country and beyond where children's environmental health is prioritized, where the health of the planet is supported, and where the health trajectory of each child is positively impacted by the settings where they spend time.

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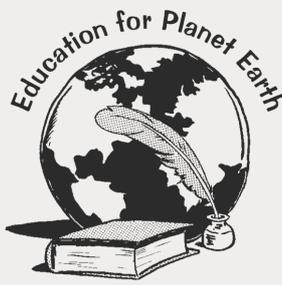
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This vision statement, outlining ten core elements of healthy and sustainable child care, is intended as a broad framework for collective efforts towards optimal and equitable child health and well-being.



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