

FAMILIES AND ENVIRONMENT: UNDERSTANDING, CULTIVATING AND CELEBRATING THEIR LINKS

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This article is a first step in exploring the relationship between families and the environment. Although families are in constant interaction with the environment in the course of their daily activities, this relationship is rarely discussed

HIGHLIGHTS

Environmental impacts on families: contaminants and human health

- It is estimated that each year, close to 6000 Canadians are victims of acute intoxication due to pesticides. By analysing data that links air pollution and mortality in eight major Canadian cities, Health Canada concluded that in these cities, approximately 5900 deaths per year are caused by air pollution.
- The place, role, and occupation of individuals within the family unit have a direct impact on their exposure to contaminants. A mother who stays mainly at home is at a greater risk of exposure to toxic substances transmitted through interior air and cleaning products. In addition, because of more frequent contact, women are at greater risk of exposure to contaminants through cosmetics, personal care products, and cleaning products.
- From the earliest stages of development in the womb to the end of their growing years, it is children who are the most vulnerable to environmental pollution. Several factors account for this greater vulnerability to toxic substances. Exposure to lead, mercury, and PCBs during pregnancy is known to affect the developing brain. It is also suspected that exposure to low levels of several neurotoxicants contribute to learning disabilities, autism, and hyperactivity with attention deficit (see also [Toxic Trespass](#)).
- The phenomenon of substances that act as *endocrine disruptors* is complex and extremely disturbing because these substances are numerous and come from a variety of sources: PCBs, dioxins and furans, organochloric pesticides (from the DDT complex),

fungicides, phthalates, bisphenol-A (often used in the manufacture of polymers, dental sealants, colouring agents, fire-retardant agents, and rigid plastic food and water containers), etc. These effects are commonly linked to fertility problems as spontaneous abortions and neo-natal mortality, male congenital malformations, lower sperm counts and quality of sperm cells, testicular cancer, early puberty, shorter lactation periods for breastfeeding mothers.

- In every study of environmental health, low-income, minority, and aboriginal families are singled out for being at higher risk. These are the families more likely to reside in older buildings contaminated by lead, asbestos, pesticides, or situated near highways or factories which are more heavily polluted areas. Poor nutrition also increases vulnerability to contaminants. Inuit mothers have higher levels of breast milk contamination than women in other regions.
- It is estimated that approximately four million people in Canada suffer from environmental hypersensitivity, also called *Multiple Chemical Sensitivity*, which renders them sensitive to commonly-found substances of everyday life sensitivity reactions can be triggered by scented products, cleaning products, laundry detergents, paints, petrochemicals, cigarette smoke, pesticides, pets, plants, fuels, electromagnetic radiation, moulds and foods. Productive people may suddenly or gradually become unable to tolerate offices, homes, schools, hospitals and public places (see also [What about at home?](#)).

The impact of families on the environment: Environmental impacts of lifestyles related to essential family needs: food, housing, and transportation.

- Today's Canadian families acquire their food supplies mainly through a system of mass distribution (supermarkets) controlled by a few large corporations (Canadian or not) who import a share of their products from around the world. The negative effects of the industrialization are: dependence on

chemical means to manage crops; huge increase in long distance transportation of goods and merchandise, principally via road and air; individuals' and society's loss of control over a part of the food supply, which the multinationals and industry "giants" now dominate to a great extent; direct effect on biodiversity and human rights

- impact of housing on the environment: construction and renovation. the increased consumption of raw building materials is directly linked to over-exploited forests which are hugely problematic in Canada. We must take into account the use of polluting and toxic components found in certain varnishes, glues, floating floors, and pressed wood products, as well as the waste generated by renovation and construction. Waste from residential construction sites represents approximately 12% of all annual waste, even though a significant portion of this material is re-usable. Space consumption related to urban sprawl and the construction of new developments consisting of single-family dwellings is also a serious issue. The energy consumption of dwellings accounts for 20% of total energy consumption in Canada, including widespread and preventable energy waste due to faulty building insulation, low-efficiency appliances and poor consumer habits
- Urban planning over the last thirty years has clearly fostered the use of motor vehicles. In 2006, 83% of Canadian families owned or rented at least one vehicle, at a great cost to consumers and to society. Cars and light trucks are responsible for 50% of GGEs (2001 data), which continue to climb in Canada. In the context of rising social and healthcare costs, it is important to remember that, while numerous studies demonstrate that public transit is much more energy-efficient than the family car, families say that the lack of public transit infrastructures and services in the suburbs is the main reason why they must own one or more cars.
- More waste is a consequence of economic growth: retail sales and waste production go hand in hand. In 2004, Canadian homes generated 13.4 million tonnes of waste, or 418 kg per person; almost three quarters of this waste went directly to landfills while the remainder was recycled.
- Theoretically, 85% of domestic waste can be recycled, re-used, or composted. The proportion of recycled waste in relation to total waste production is still only 27%. Municipalities and families seem, however, to have made some progress: overall, Canadians' access

to recycling programs for glass, paper, plastic, and metal has increased between 1994 and 2006. Over the same period, Canadian families' participation in these programs has also increased: currently, 97% of Canadians participate in a recycling program when they have access to it (see also [If every Canadian Household...](#)).

- Families do contribute, especially as consumers, to dire environmental problems. But it should also be remembered that families are largely dependent on situations that result from the policies and decisions of local, provincial, and national governments, and of industry and the global market. In this context, what are the choices and responsibilities that families can truly exercise?

Concrete Actions: responsibility of the families, of the community, of public policies

- How can environmental awareness arise in families, and how does this awareness translate into action? Are the moral values that lead to quality relationships in human society, similar in nature to the values that encourage sensitivity to the environment and a more sustainable society? Sensitivity to the environment has points in common with empathy, and contains elements of moral judgement compatible with a sense of responsibility.
- Within the meaning of sustainable development, it is useful to remember the notion of *inheritance*: current generations have the moral duty to protect natural resources in the interest of future generations. "We do not possess the Earth, we borrow it from our children," says the well-known Amerindian proverb. If there is a place in society where the notion of heritage, of inheritance, can acquire meaning and resonance, it is the family.
- Families are faced with a huge new challenge: *understanding* environmental problems, and deciding *what to do* about them.
- Canadian families are key consumers and economic players, and businesses do in fact adjust to their clients' demands when these demands are clearly expressed. For example, between 1998 and 2003, the sale value of fair-trade coffee multiplied by 29 in Canada, which translates as almost 20 million Canadian dollars in 2003 alone. This was due in great part to consumer awareness-raising campaigns conducted by NGOs like OXFAM, Équiterre, and others.

- Families cannot carry the full burden of correcting decades of total market economy development. They need the support of progressive public policies, not only to obtain more information, but also to obtain incentives to access alternative products and services. In this context, many other actors share the responsibility for environmental protection and sustainable development.
- Government Policies. Ex. : Develop, manage, and enforce certification procedures that identify, on commercial labels, products that originate from sustainable practices (organic growing certification, FSC for wood products, or SeaChoice for fish products), or that are capable of excellent energy performance. This would greatly facilitate ecoresponsible purchases for families.
- Local Policies. Ex.: Elaborating and defining a plan for urban development that is sustainable and inclusive by facilitating the participation, consultation, and awareness of local residents; Offering a well-developed public transit network that is accessible to everyone; Implementing urban zoning and urban renewal projects that counteract sprawl and help curtail the use of motor vehicles, and revitalizing people-oriented neighbourhoods that provide numerous local services.
- NGOs, Professional Associations, and Labour Unions: Consumer associations that advocate responsible consumption, environmental protection, fairness and health, and certain labour unions and family associations are playing a key role in informing the public, in the research and development of solutions to environmental problems, and in the development of environmental policies. They are often good “rallying points” for families.

The Role of Businesses: Some businesses and professional groups are making significant contributions to sustainable development by devising ecologically sound techniques and materials that promote recycling and energy efficiency. Others contribute to the implementation of environmental certification, such as the FSC standard for wood products certification, LEED for building certification, and others for organic agricultural standards. Large and medium businesses monitor their sustainable development programs through follow-up and results evaluation protocols.

The Vanier Institute of the Family, established in 1965 under the patronage of Their Excellencies Governor-General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier, is a national, charitable organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of Canadian families. It is governed by a volunteer board with regional representation from across Canada.

