Children as agents of change

How children have influenced health and environment policy

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Politicians are more likely to tackle an issue concerning children than adults.

Ministers are too inhibited about tackling the bad health of adults, perhaps for fear of the ‘nanny state’ charge. To begin with children and then widen out the programme to adults may make a lot of sense.
"Children first" is an inspirational slogan that has motivated and united people to action across social, economic and political divides. The phrase was coined by the United Nations Children's Fund in 1990 as a statement of the principle that children must come first in receiving aid.

Now new research of the European Child Safety Alliance shows the call has another meaning: that many policies, actions and laws designed to improve children's lives also improve the lives of adults.

The paper produced as a result of the research, 'That Sensitive Indicator of the World: A Historical Perspective on Children as Agents of Change in the Field of Health and the Environment,' gives numerous examples of the way in which changes for children have paved the way for changes that help the wider community.
For several hundred years children have acted as catalysts for change. Laws protecting workers in industrialised countries began with concern for the plight of child labourers. One of the earliest legislative measures to combat the appalling conditions in textile mills during Britain’s Industrial Revolution, the 1833 Factory Act, banned child workers under nine years old. They formed only a fraction of the workforce, yet the law’s insistence, in the words of a historian, that “central government [can regulate] private enterprise for the public’s welfare” was of enormous symbolic importance. Children were at the heart of creating a perception that decent labour and living conditions for people did not impede the working of the economy. That represented a huge shift in political thought, as it became acceptable for governments to regulate economic activity and intervene in family life.

More recently, concern for children around the world — based on writer George Bernard Shaw’s comment that “I have no enemies under the age of seven” — has played a key role in creating the current era of international co-operation in trying to raise standards of living in developing countries. Children are now a lever for change on a global stage.

In addition, their vulnerability has given them a crucial role in the growth of the health and environment movement, and concern for their welfare — “we hold the world in trust for our children and their children” — is at the heart of the concept of sustainable development. This booklet summarises the research paper and shares lessons from history that support the needed actions of parents, relatives, caregivers, governments, industry, public health professionals and the media in advancing the health and safety of children.

Children are perceived differently at each age and by different cultures. However, some basic human rights and needs are common to children in every age and culture — and health is one of them. We hope this report and background paper can help improve the health of children everywhere.

In the words of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most universally embraced human rights treaty in history: “In all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” — that means actions to improve the lives of children take precedence over the blocking arguments used by vested interests, such as “this measure will be too expensive” or “the time is not ripe for that measure.”
Just as miners once carried canaries underground to give early warning of dangerous gases, children’s vulnerability can sound the alert for society-wide hazards:

> The shocking discovery in the 1960s that pregnant women prescribed with the drug thalidomide as a sedative and as a treatment for nausea were giving birth to babies with deformed limbs led to a tightening of regulations on medicines.

> Children’s sensitivity to pesticides has led to demands in several countries for lower limits for pesticide residues in food. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says infants and children may be especially sensitive to health risks from pesticides because their internal organs are still developing and maturing and because in relation to their body weight infants and children eat and drink more than adults, possibly increasing their exposure to pesticides in food and water.

So “EPA carefully evaluates children’s exposure to pesticide residues in and on foods they most commonly eat... and is also evaluating new and existing pesticides to ensure that they can be used with a reasonable certainty of no harm to adults as well as infants and children.”

> The breakthrough in the drive to remove lead from petrol, still not achieved in many parts of the world, came when activists highlighted how the young were particularly affected. The vulnerability of children was crucial in winning the argument and getting policy changed.

Children’s vulnerability requires special care but this very vulnerability may reveal the effect of toxins and side-effects associated with drugs, chemicals and environmental factors before they show up in adults.
Helping children is good in itself, but also benefits the whole of society. This is true both for general situations (e.g. tomorrow’s society will reap the benefits or suffer the consequences of the way we treat children today) and particular examples (e.g. safer roads for children also mean fewer fatalities and injuries for adults).

Often, governments’ first tentative steps to help children have paved the way for the provision of help for adults as well.

The presence of so many impoverished children in the French city of Lyons in the 1520s – "The great number of little children crying and hooting with hunger and cold day and night through the town… Oh what confusion, heartbreak and scandal," recorded a contemporary account – led a group of business people and lawyers to set up a system of relief. The plight of children provoked action, but the action helped reduce suffering among a much wider section of the population.

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Ambitious reformers, with the best intentions, sometimes ignore the chance for partial improvements in order to concentrate on securing more far-reaching reforms. In general, however, reformers seem to have been more successful when working with specific target areas rather than trying for rapid and radical overall change. Modest gains can start a process that creates the conditions for bigger changes.

The vast majority of the child-inspired measures in early industrial Europe were not intended to rectify basic inequalities: indeed, many were proposed specifically to defuse industrial unrest. Some were conditional based on the good conduct of workers, and could be withdrawn for strikes, absenteeism or lateness. Nevertheless, over the years, allowances helped many poor people.
4. The strength of the weak

Images of vulnerable children can be powerful symbols in the fight for a better future.

- Women's rights campaigners used infant health in their fight for the right to vote. Posters featured babies declaring "Give mother the vote - we need it" were very successful.
- Child chimney sweeps were so notorious in 19th century England that "climbing boys" became a national symbol for exploited youngsters.
- Concern over the mounting number of child deaths and injuries from road accidents in industrialised countries led to safety first and "No Accident Day" campaigns. Even during the 18th century many US cities saw protests against accidents involving children. Campaigners were aware of children's symbolic role in raising awareness. In the 1930s the Journal of the American Medical Association urged that the "more marked sentiment" of public response to child accidents should be utilised "as a strategy to obtain public support for general safety programs."

Today, images of suffering children are a visual symbol of war, famine, pestilence, catastrophe, poverty and economic crises - a potent force in spreading ideas and justifying action on international aid and intervention. However, as with all symbols, over-use can breed disinterest or even contempt.

"Childhood is the foundation of life. On good foundations one can build great and good edifices."

Philip of Navare, in the 13th century
Keeping records may seem a dull, almost heartless approach to problems affecting children, but the practice may be the beginning of the solution.

> Historically, the growth of towns brought the problems of the poor and destitute into focus, whilst scientific and statistical developments meant that these concerns could be identified and quantified. So, gradually, what had seemed inevitable and uncontrollable became unacceptable and required attention.

> Towards the end of the 19th century, health reformers in several industrialised countries found that pointing to the infant death rate gave force to their concerns about child health.

Documenting abuses or undesirable trends can force politicians and governments to take note. This is the thinking, for example, behind The United Nations Children’s Fund’s emphasis on birth registration in all countries. ... unregistered children are almost always from poor, marginalised or displaced families or from countries where registration systems are not in place or not functioning.

Registration helps ensure that children enrol in school at the right age, enforce laws relating to minimum age for employment, counter forced marriage of young girls, protect youngsters from underage military service and from police harassment, and helps secure the child’s right to a nationality.

Census surveys, disease and injury registries and good record-keeping have helped identify environmental and health hazards to children including unborn babies, as in the case of fetal damage following exposure to medical X-rays.

Some problems are not acknowledged and therefore can only be tackled when they are codified and counted.

Winning an argument about improving children’s health or welfare is not enough; the resultant action can be painfully - and needlessly - slow.

> In 1844 the Reverend Patrick Brontë, father of the famous literary sisters in England, wrote to the local newspaper:

> “You know that all garments made of cotton or linen are particularly flammable and that clothes of woollen or silk are much less so and cannot be ignited at all without the most careless and wanton neglect … [in] more than 20 years, I have performed the funeral service over 90 or 100 children [who died as a result of burns]...”

Yet it was only in 1967 that the Night-dress (Safety) Regulations became law in the United Kingdom and today only six European Union member states have adopted similar regulations.

> Similarly, it took three-quarters of a century, from the 1802 Health and Morals of Apprentices Act to the 1870 Education Act, to move children from the workroom to the schoolroom in Britain.

Some of the dangers of lead poisoning have been known for at least 2,500 years, but action was slow to reduce these. Lead poisoning was seen, and dismissed, as an occupational disease for adults. The breakthrough for reformers in the West came with the highlighting of the particular vulnerability of the young to low levels of lead from petrol and paint which damaged their brains. The battle has not yet been won; leaded petrol is still used in many countries.

Such time lags show the power of vested interests and of political and bureaucratic inertia that often line up against measures to improve child health.

All this underlines the importance of monitoring the implementation of recommendations, promises and legislation, and of being persistent in advocating change.
Paternalism, the desire to create an obedient workforce, compassion, the nurturing of an economic resource, voter appeal, idealism and religious belief have also been drivers for change at various times in various places.

In 1830s Britain, for example, pressure for reform came from mill workers, social conservatives (driven partly by fear of social unrest), the ‘romantics’ (including poets who saw the pre-industrial era as a golden age before the exploitation of children), reformers (who supported capitalism but saw children as a special case), and government.

Efficient campaigns need to harness these different approaches in order to overcome powerful opposition.

“Repulics that set most store by their good citizens give most attention to the upbringing of their children.”
- Jan van Beverwijck, 1656
Literature gave a powerful push for reform in Europe and North America following the emergence of the child as a focus of literary interest in the late 18th century.

> The English author Charles Dickens (1812-1870) - writing at a time when London had 30,000 street-children - was a major figure in the use of literature as a campaigning device to change hearts and minds. In Nicholas Nickleby he attacked boarding schools (drawing several to close), in Hard Times the target was industrial conditions. In reading A Christmas Carol, in which a child, Tiny Tim, changes the view of a miser, an American factory owner was said to have immediately given his workers a day's holiday. The establishment of the Tiny Tim Guild for Poor Crippled Children was another result of the book. By seeing the child as a "sensitive register of the world," Dickens was able to make a range of biting social comments on the economic, social, and political conditions of society. Several critics believe he helped shape the cultural attitudes that enabled reform to take place.

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"Evil work which takes the tender youngsters in its claws, which produces wealth while creating wretchedness, which uses a child like a tool."

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In the 1860s the lives of French factory children were portrayed in works such as Bourdeneau Marie Blondel, Emile Bocquart’s Roman de drague, and Alphonse Daudet’s Le Petit Chose. These books fuelled the 19th-century French movement against child labour and for the reform of public health. By the time of Emile Zola’s powerful novel Germinal, in 1884, child labour was just one part of the plight of the vulnerable that the novelist was attacking.

By harnessing the idea of "innocent victims" immediately after the First World War and during the Soviet famine of the 1920s, Save the Children achieved an astonishing breakthrough by winning support for the idea of helping those whom had been former enemies.

In the Second World War, the concept of getting aid to innocent victims of conflict - even those on the opposing side - gave birth to another major aid agency, Oxfam.

In the 1980s, the skin cancer threat to children from the hole in the ozone layer helped mobilise global support for the international agreement to phase out CFCs (the chemicals in spray cans and refrigerators that were creating the hole in the ozone layer).

In 1990 UNICEF restated the principle of "children first" in aid. One commentator has stated that "Without the focus specifically on children, on all children, irrespective of race, nationality or creed, the barriers that prevented international co-operation would never have been surmounted to the extent that they were."

(Law, 1994)
10. hidden hazards

Public clamour for an end to particular outrages affecting children can leave other problems untreated, or even politically invisible. Problems affecting children in towns and cities receive far more attention than problems in rural areas. In some societies, problems facing girls are given lower priority than problems for boys. In others, children of migrants forced to flee their homes because of conflict get less attention than they should.

Despite the rapid growth of towns in the industrial revolution in Europe, agriculture remained a major employer of children – but their problems rarely raised calls for action in the same way that the plight of factory children provoked.

The United Nations Children’s Fund points out that the daily death of 20,000 children from preventable diseases gets no headlines but if the same number were killed in a series of jumbo jet crashes, there would be international outrage.

In the year of the 1966 Aberfan colliery disaster in Wales, in which 116 children died, 879 British children were killed on the roads. Aberfan sparked nation-wide anger and demand for change: the road toll was generally seen as part of everyday life and provoked no outcry. Reformers of child rights and welfare need to monitor and co-ordinate their activities to ensure that important issues affecting children are not overlooked.

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11. children are the future and need special protection

The needs of children, now and in the future, have played a vital role in many of the arguments over health and environmental issues in the past 150 years.

Children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are at the heart of the idea of “sustainable development” - the precept that the present generation has a responsibility to the future. Thus, as yet unborn children become an emotional lever for action today.

Concern for the welfare of future generations of children, “the human bridges across the generations,” also feeds into the “precautionary principle” of sustainability. This argues that if there is uncertainty about the impact of a particular development, there is a need to show that there will be no damaging effects in the future. In other words, current activities should not discount the future by shifting costs to later generations. The European Environment Agency urges this approach as part of its concern for environmental pollution.

The argument for “intergenerational equity” has an ethical basis, but it is the emotional impact of the child image that generates much of its force. Children provide a simple and appealing symbol of the need to avert future problems and why we should care about them, just as the suffering child has been used to symbolise the plight of the developing world today.

As a UNICEF official said:

“We are surely against children – including future generations of children – when we poison our air and water, and demolish our forests, when we foment or tolerate racism, ethnic hatred, terrorism or societal violence, and when we spend obscene sums on weapons of personal or mass destruction at the expense of the simplest interventions needed to overcome hunger, malnutrition and fatal or disabling disease attacking children.”

(J. R. Himes, 1997)

For the future, too, perhaps there is a new aspect to take into account no longer just a matter of how helping children will help adults, but how children will help themselves. Children’s participation in decision-making is a growing phenomenon and is likely to be another area in which children continue their role as catalysts for change.
Children play an important role as agents of change for society. It is in everyone’s interest that we invest real resources to support—and not just talk about—their needs.

**why children need the precautionary principle**

- **Scientific complexity and uncertainty** - The impacts of environmental stressors on children are more complex, less researched, and less understood than those impacts on adults.
- **Sensitive biomarkers** - The likelihood of serious harm to children from such impacts is generally greater than for adults because of their different and changing stages of biological development, their behavior, and their greater exposure in relation to body weight.
- **Longer to live** - Both the risks and the benefits of avoided risk have longer time to impact children and society than adults.
- **Benefit inequity** - Of the risks to children from society’s activities, children get proportionately fewer benefits from them than adults do, such as jobs, car driving, and many consumer products.
- **Future harm** - Many of today’s serious environmental threats, such as impending water shortages, climate change, endocrine disruption, and biodiversity loss will impinge proportionately more on children and their children than on this generation of adults.
- **Lack of power** - Of the risks to children from society’s activities, children have a greater proportion that is imposed on them involuntarily, yet they have least power to avoid them.