

Children & Environment

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Abstract

The relationship between children and their environment is a critical factor influencing their overall development, health, and future well-being. This paper explores the interdependence between children and their surroundings, including family, community, and the physical environment. It discusses how environmental factors such as green spaces, pollution, and socioeconomic conditions affect children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Additionally, it explores how children's behaviors influence the environment, and proposes strategies to foster positive interdependence. Emphasis is placed on environmental education, community engagement, and sustainable practices to promote well-being and environmental stewardship among children.

The environment in which a child grows up plays a foundational role in shaping every dimension of their development. From birth, children are influenced by both microenvironments such as family, school, and peer groups and macroenvironments that include socio-economic factors, access to natural spaces, and environmental quality. The relationship between children and their environment is not one-directional; children also impact the environments they interact with, from their immediate household settings to larger community and ecological systems. Understanding this mutual dependence is key to promoting optimal development, well-being, and sustainability. As we face global challenges such as climate change, urbanization, and socio-economic inequality, it becomes increasingly critical to examine how environments affect children and how children can be empowered to positively influence their surroundings.

To start off, family is often considered the first and most influential environment for a child. Parenting styles, family structure, emotional availability, and socioeconomic conditions directly affect how children develop emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Supportive parenting fosters self-confidence, resilience, and healthy interpersonal relationships, while neglectful or abusive parenting can lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties. Further, financial instability can result in stress, poor nutrition, lack of access to healthcare, and reduced educational opportunities, further compounding developmental challenges. Children raised in stable and nurturing family environments tend to perform better academically, demonstrate higher emotional intelligence, and are better equipped to form healthy relationships.

Children do not develop in isolation; the quality and accessibility of community resources such as schools, parks, libraries, healthcare services, and recreational programs play an essential role in shaping their development. Children who attend well-resourced schools with trained educators and supportive environments tend to achieve better educational outcomes. Access to healthcare ensures early intervention in case of physical or mental health issues, which is crucial during formative years. Furthermore, participation in extracurricular and community programs helps children develop teamwork, communication, and leadership skills, while also building a sense of belonging and identity within their community (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Next, the physical characteristics of a child's surroundings have profound impacts on their health and development. Access to green spaces, safe neighborhoods, clean air and water, and stimulating indoor environments is crucial for healthy physical and mental growth. Research has shown that time spent in nature can reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance cognitive functioning. Conversely, exposure to environmental toxins such as lead, pesticides, or industrial pollutants can impair neurological development and increase the risk of chronic illnesses. Poor housing conditions, overcrowding, and lack of safe play spaces are also associated with developmental delays and behavioral problems in children.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a significant determinant of a child's developmental outcomes. Children in low-SES households often face challenges such as food insecurity,

limited access to quality education, exposure to violence, and environmental hazards. These disadvantages create a cumulative burden that can lead to poor academic performance, lower self-esteem, and long-term health problems. At a broader level, social determinants of health such as neighborhood quality, public infrastructure, and systemic inequalities affect entire communities. It is imperative that governments and societies work to reduce these disparities to ensure every child has an equitable opportunity to succeed.

Children's Impact on the Environment

While children are often seen as passive recipients of environmental conditions, their daily behaviors also contribute to the health of their surroundings. Their consumption patterns ranging from the food they eat to the toys they play with act as environmental footprints. Overconsumption of packaged goods, disposable diapers, plastic toys, and fast fashion contributes to waste and pollution. Teaching children about responsible consumption, recycling, and reducing waste can significantly decrease their environmental impact. Moreover, environmentally-conscious habits formed during childhood are more likely to continue into adulthood. Children are naturally curious and open to learning, making them ideal candidates for environmental education. By teaching children about climate change, biodiversity, pollution, and sustainability, we can cultivate a generation of environmentally literate citizens. Environmental stewardship programs can include hands-on activities such as gardening, recycling, water conservation, or tree planting. These experiences not only educate children about the importance of conservation but also instill a sense of personal responsibility for the planet's health (UNICEF, 2020).

Lastly, children's involvement in local environmental or civic initiatives gives rise to a sense of belonging and social responsibility. Whether participating in park clean-ups, environmental clubs, or community gardening, these activities build leadership skills and reinforce the idea that every individual can make a difference. Involving children in community projects also strengthens intergenerational relationships and fosters community cohesion.

Strategies for Promoting Positive Interdependence

Environmental education is a cornerstone for promoting awareness, responsibility, and action among children. When integrated into school curricula, it can promote interdisciplinary learning, enhance critical thinking skills, and spark interest in science, geography, and ethics. Lessons can be adapted for different age groups, ensuring concepts such as recycling, energy conservation, and climate justice are understood in age-appropriate ways. Inclusive education approaches should ensure that children with disabilities or learning challenges are also given access to experiential and environmental learning opportunities (Wilson, 2018).

Thus, teaching children to adopt sustainable practices helps build long-term environmental responsibility. Simple habits like turning off unused lights, carrying reusable water bottles, using public transportation, or composting food waste can have a lasting impact. Schools and families play an essential role in modeling these behaviors. Introducing sustainability-themed games, challenges, and projects can make learning fun and practical.

Furthermore, engaging children in community-based environmental projects empowers them to act as change-makers. These projects could include local biodiversity monitoring, creating urban gardens, designing eco-friendly campaigns, or participating in climate marches. Not only do such activities raise awareness, but they also provide children with a platform to express their concerns and contribute meaningfully to societal development. Children imitate the behaviors of adults around them. Parents, educators, and community leaders must consistently model environmentally-responsible behaviors such as recycling, minimizing single-use plastics, or using energy-efficient appliances. Additionally, creating safe, nurturing, and toxin-free environments is vital. Schools, daycare centers, and homes must be designed to minimize environmental hazards, reduce exposure to pollutants, and promote healthy habits such as hygiene and exercise.

A positive, reciprocal relationship between children and their environment creates a foundation for healthier individuals and more sustainable communities. Children raised in safe, green, and clean environments experience fewer illnesses, lower stress levels, and better emotional regulation. Time spent outdoors is associated with improved attention spans, reduced symptoms of ADHD, and enhanced immune systems. Understanding and valuing nature are more likely to advocate for environmental issues and make eco-friendly choices in

adulthood. Early exposure to nature is a predictor of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors later in life.

Children should be made aware of the connection between personal actions and global consequences nurtures empathy, compassion, and a sense of justice. This will enable them to learn that they are part of a global ecosystem and that their choices impact both people and the planet.

To conclude, the relationship between children and their environment is deeply intertwined and complex. This interdependence shapes not only the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of children but also the sustainability and well-being of the communities and ecosystems they inhabit. By recognizing this dynamic, we can adopt an approach that involves strategies such as environmental education, community engagement, role-modelling, and the creation of safe and supportive environments that are not just beneficial but essential for a child's development. These interventions empower children to become informed, responsible, and active participants in environmental stewardship from an early age.

In addition, as we face increasingly complex global challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality, building a generation that is both developmentally healthy and environmentally conscious is not optional but imperative. Building and maintaining positive interdependence between children and their environments will contribute to healthier individuals, stronger communities, and a more sustainable planet.

Finally, children are not merely future stewards of the earth; they are active contributors to environmental change today. By investing in their development within nurturing, sustainable environments, and by instilling in them the values of respect, responsibility, and resilience, we lay the foundation for a healthier, more equitable, and environmentally secure future for all.

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