April 22, 2014

On Earth Day, young people frolic at festivals nationwide, sampling vegan cupcakes, gathering pamphlets about eco-friendly homes, and meandering through tented aisles of fair trade vendors peddling their wares. But what about beyond that day -- do youth care about the environment? And why should they?

Here are five things to know about today's kids and the environment:

**1. Unhealthy environment = unhealthy kids**

Air pollution was linked to seven million deaths worldwide in 2012 alone; that's one in eight deaths! Because they eat, drink, and breathe more than adults do relative to their size, children are at risk of being exposed to relatively higher amounts of chemicals than adults, and their still-developing bodies and organs can be more vulnerable to contaminants' toxic effects. Some experts even attribute a small percentage of developmental disabilities to exposure to toxic chemicals.

**Clean air and water** support children’s physical and mental development. Air pollutants found throughout the U.S. are associated with asthma, chronic bronchitis and other lung diseases. Contaminants in drinking water can lead to increased cancer risk, poisoning, gastrointestinal illnesses, and more. **Indoors**, exposure to lead-based paint can impact the nervous system and brain development, and asthma can be exacerbated by mold and dust. Almost one in four children ages three to eleven **lives with at least one smoker**; these children are at greater risk of pneumonia, bronchitis, increased asthma attacks, and ear infections. Only a year after parts of the U.S. enacted **smoking bans**, in fact, children's hospital visits for asthma in those areas dropped significantly. **Asthma** is the third leading cause of hospitalization for kids under 15.
Environmental hazards affect different children differently.
Environmental contamination disproportionately affects certain children. Blood lead levels are decreasing overall, but they're higher for children in low-income families, non-Hispanic black children, and children in older housing. In a recent study, white children who had high exposure to traffic-related air pollution were three times more likely to be readmitted to the hospital for asthma, while for black children no link was found. Still, black children had higher asthma readmission rates overall, and Hispanic and non-Hispanic black children are more likely to have asthma. Length, magnitude, and route of exposure all play a role in determining which kids are most affected by a contaminant or other environmental factor. So does the developmental stage the child is in (including in utero) and the child's genetic makeup; some children might not be affected at all by a given exposure. Children living in areas with few locally-created environmental hazards are still at risk: air pollution travels -- pollution from one part of the world can even change the weather elsewhere.

Environmental threats are increasing, and kids know it.
Scientists are concerned that the impacts of climate change will rapidly increase, threatening to cause severe weather and drown coastal cities, disrupt global food supply, increase the spread of water-associated diseases, and more. For children, this isn't much to look forward to, but it means their actions now will matter down the road. Polling by the Nature Conservancy found that youth (ages 13 to 18) are unhappy with the condition of the environment. Most say previous generations damaged it and have left it for the current generation to fix. And many youth don’t trust the government to address major problems like the environment.

Many youth don't act on their knowledge of environmental issues.
Today's youth know the environment needs repair, but they report caring less and doing less for the environment themselves than older Americans do. This mirrors the environmental confusion among adults: for example, nearly 97 percent of climate scientists agree that human-caused global warming is happening, but only 62 percent of U.S. adults believe scientists agree it is happening, and nearly half of Americans only worry a little, or not at all, about global warming. Most youth are far more likely to spend time consuming media than being outdoors, saying it's uncomfortable in nature (too many bugs, too hot or cold), or that natural areas are too far away from home; children who are obese also have lower rates of participation and interest in outdoor activities.
There's some good news about kids and the environment.

Youth who say they've had a meaningful experience outdoors are significantly more likely to be concerned with the condition of the environment, and are more likely to say environmental protection should be prioritized over economic growth. And the situation is getting better in some regards. From 1999 to 2009, the proportion of children living in counties with unhealthy air quality decreased. The percentage of children living with smokers has decreased, and more community drinking water systems meet applicable health-based standards. Chemical levels in sampled fruits and vegetables are lower than they were a decade ago. In a 2012 Child Trends and Knowledge Networks survey of 12- to 18-year-olds nationally about their actions during the month prior, almost half said they had recycled almost daily, more than 30 percent had volunteered in a project to help the environment, and almost half had said something to a friend who did something harmful to the environment. (Researchers, here's a scale for measuring environmental stewardship!)

To keep the good news flowing, here are some ideas to help kids learn about the Earth, beyond Earth Day.

Contributor:
August Aldebot-Green