

Highlights of [GAO-10-205](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Exposure to toxic chemicals or environmental pollutants may harm the health of the nation’s 74 million children and contribute to increases in asthma and developmental impairments. In 2007, 66 percent of children lived in counties exceeding allowable levels for at least one of the six principal air pollutants that cause or aggravate asthma, contributing to medical costs of \$3.2 billion per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 1997, Executive Order 13045 mandated that agencies place a high priority on children’s risks and required that policies, programs, activities, and standards address those risks. In response, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created the Office of Children’s Health Protection and convened the Children’s Health Protection Advisory Committee.

This report assesses the extent to which EPA has institutionalized consideration of children’s health through (1) strategies and priorities, (2) key offices and other child-focused resources, and (3) participation in interagency efforts. GAO reviewed numerous documents and met with EPA and other officials for this report.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends improvements to help EPA protect children, and EPA agreed to implement them. GAO also suggests that Congress consider reinstating a government-wide task force on children’s environmental health.

[View GAO-10-205 or key components.](#) For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

High-level Strategy and Leadership Needed to Continue Progress toward Protecting Children from Environmental Threats

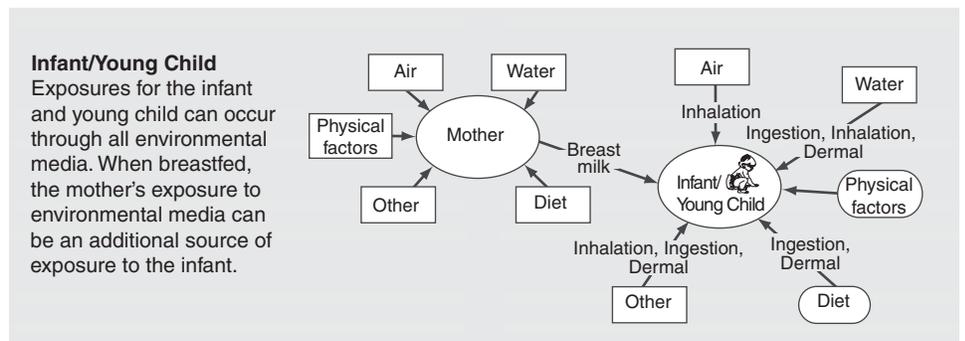
What GAO Found

EPA has developed policies and guidance to consider children, but it has not maintained attention to children through agency strategies and priorities. In 1996, EPA created a national agenda on children’s health, and its 1997 and 2000 strategic plans highlighted children’s health as a key cross-agency program. As a result, the agency’s research advanced the understanding of children’s vulnerabilities. However, EPA has not updated the agenda since 1996, and the focus on children is absent from the 2003, 2006, and September 2009 draft strategic plans.

EPA has not fully used the Office of Children’s Health Protection and other child-focused resources. The active involvement of managers from the office and experts from the Children’s Health Protection Advisory Committee has been lacking, as has the involvement of key staff throughout EPA. Although EPA now has a new Director of Children’s Health, the office had not had consistent leadership since 2002, hampering its ability to support and facilitate agencywide efforts and elevate matters of importance with senior officials. For example, a previous director established workgroups to bring together officials from the program offices and the children’s health office, but a subsequent acting director eliminated these groups, effectively halting work on a key set of children’s health recommendations. In addition, the regional children’s health coordinators—who provide outreach and coordination for EPA—have no national strategy or dedicated resources. Finally, the advisory committee has provided hundreds of recommendations, but EPA has requested advice on draft regulations only three times in the last decade.

While EPA leadership is key to national efforts to protect children from environmental threats, EPA’s efforts have been hampered by the expiration in 2005 of certain provisions in the executive order. For example, the Task Force on Children’s Environmental Health provided EPA with a forum for interagency leadership on important federal efforts, such as the National Children’s Study. It also provided biennial reports that helped establish federal research priorities.

Children Are Exposed to Many Sources of Potentially-harmful Environmental Pollutants



Source: EPA, A Framework For Assessing Health Risks of Environmental Exposure to Children (2006).