

Protecting Our Children by Preserving the Environment

10 Basic Issues

By Patty Bates-Ballard

Most Americans believe that preserving the environment is important, whether from a perspective of self-preservation, or a broader spiritual worldview. Teaching ecological principles to your children could make a difference in their future quality of life. But who can keep it all straight? Can't tell a greenhouse gas from a GMO? And what's all this about Kyoto? This environmental primer covers ten basic issues that parents really do need to understand in order to make healthy



choices for our children and our planet.

1) Chemicals. At the same time that the industrial revolution (i.e., machines doing a lot of the work people used to do) has provided a more comfortable life, it has introduced somewhere around 70,000 new chemicals into our lives. These chemicals are accompanied by increases in diseases like asthma, cancer and ADHD (not to mention obesity). From cleaning products to finishes on wood, carpet and vinyl, we are overloaded with chemicals that can cause severe reactions in children, whose immune systems are less developed, and who absorb more pollutants per pound of body weight than adults. Most plastics are made from petroleum, combined with various chemicals. Poly vinyl chloride (PVC) is quite toxic – just take one whiff of a brand new piece of the stuff. That “new smell” of a car, building, or even a plastic toy is a warning sign that toxic ‘volatile organic compounds’ are filling up your

lungs and those of your family. What to do: Use natural cleaning products that contain no harsh chemicals and give the added bonus of being un-huffable. When building or remodeling a home or office, ask for environmentally friendly building materials. When you shop for toys, clothing, dishware, greeting cards, etc., look for items made of cotton, glass, and other natural and recycled materials. Take your own cloth bags on all your shopping trips.

2) Petroleum. Even though oil is becoming increasingly scarce, we keep burning it like there's an endless supply. Most of the petroleum that's left in the earth is either in pristine wilderness areas



or politically treacherous developing countries. The more oil we continue to use, the less there will be, and the more wars there will be fought over it. What to do: Walk more and combine trips that require driving. Turn off the lights and the TV when you leave the room and use your electric heater and air conditioner sparingly – even if you aren't worried about the money -- at least save the oil.

3) Carbon dioxide. When cars and factories burn oil, they produce carbon dioxide gas in such extreme



amounts that is warming up our climate. CO₂ is one of the ‘greenhouse gases’ so-named because they are turning our planet into a greenhouse. (In case you haven't been in a greenhouse lately, think sauna.) NASA predicts that 2005 will be the hottest year on record. Just a slightly warmer climate already has ancient glaciers melting, raising sea levels and creating severe weather like the record hurricane season of 2004. Icebergs that have for centuries helped keep the earth's tectonic plates in place are also melting. So expect more movement, i.e., earthquakes, underwater volcanoes and tsunamis. But the Kyoto Protocol, signed by 141 countries committed to lowering greenhouse gas emissions, is missing the signature of the worst polluter, the U.S. Even though there is general agreement in the scientific community across the world, the U.S. government continues to deny that greenhouse gases are indeed warming the climate. What to do: Make your next vehicle a hybrid, take public transportation, or

carpool. Support organizations working to reduce global warming.



People living on beaches may want to consider relocating.

4) Trees and oceans. Trees and oceans are Mother Nature's answer to carbon dioxide. They can suck in CO₂ and give back oxygen. But we're cutting down 4 billion trees a year, millions to produce junk mail that nobody reads. All the oil and other refuse dumped down sewers and into waterways ends up in the oceans, compromising their ability to absorb CO₂. What to do:



Teach respect for the natural world and all it provides for us, and raise your children to see littering as inconceivable. Get off the mailing lists of catalogues you just throw away. Buy paper/wood products made from renewable sources like cork, bamboo, seaweed, and hemp whenever possible.

5) Air Pollution. Coal burning electric plants, industrial factories and smelters, along with automobiles, are also filling our air with noxious sulfur, nitrogen (the key ingredients in acid rain), and ozone. Not only harmful to buildings, plants and animals, this pollution is the main culprit in the huge increase in asthma and skin cancers. Folks, the

U.S. government is also part of the problem here. The new "Clear Skies Act" goes easier on corporate polluters than did the older "Clean Air Act." What to do: Email the president, your congressperson and senators about these issues. It takes less than 5 minutes to email all four at the non-partisan website www.votesmart.org. Spend 10 minutes and you can also find out how they've voted on environmental issues. Contribute to and vote for candidates who make our environment a priority.



6) Water. Irresponsible waste and inadequate water management already forces hundreds of millions of people in our world to live without access to safe water. Before long, half of the world will face this reality. In the U.S., one of four of America's largest industrial plants is in violation of clean water standards. Corporate factory farms are a regular source of water pollution, as runoff from animal waste contaminates nearby streams and lakes. About 40,000 times every year, flooding causes antiquated sewage systems to overflow, spilling raw sewage into lakes, rivers and coastal waters. Instead of addressing the problem, funding to update these systems has been cut drastically and a new blending policy instituted allowing partially treated sewage to be intentionally discharged into American waterways during floods. Though America's wetlands serve as a filter for pollution as well as floods and other storms, almost 60,000 acres of wetlands are destroyed each year. What to do: Use water sparingly. Water the lawn in the early morning and don't over-water; better yet, install drought-hardy plants. Sweep the

sidewalk rather than using water to clean it. Turn off the water while washing the car, brushing your teeth and shaving. Run only full loads of laundry and dishes. Install water-saving plumbing. Save rain water and the water you run waiting for it to get hot for watering plants.

7) Waste. Most of our trash goes to landfills – the food, diapers, plastic, paper, glass and metal, as well as tires, batteries, cameras, cell phones and computers (replete with toxic chemicals and heavy metals) that we don't recycle gets dumped on top of other heaps of trash. This sloppy mess often leaches all manner of nasty things into surrounding soil and groundwater. A new landfill in north Texas will be 25 stories tall when it's full, after which they'll open another. Landfills also produce lots of greenhouse gases like CO₂ and



methane. And then there's nuclear waste, which we continue to produce even though we can't seem to figure out where to store it. What to do: Get serious about recycling everything you can. Then increase the demand for products made of recycled materials by asking for them everywhere you shop.

8) Chlorine. Most of the trash that is not landfilled is incinerated. That includes a lot of paper products that have been bleached white by



chlorine. Burning chlorine produces VERY toxic chemicals called dioxins. Sound familiar? Dioxin is the poison that almost killed the president of Ukraine, Victor Yushchenko. You've probably seen pictures of his pock-marked face on the news. What to do: Buy paper products that have not been bleached with chlorine, available at more progressive grocery stores. Watch out for chlorinated compounds in foods also.

9) Food. When you go grocery shopping, unless the food specifically says it's organic, then it is likely loaded with pesticides and genetically modified or engineered



organisms (GMO/GEOs), while most meat and dairy contain antibiotics, steroids and other hormones. Antibiotics are used because of the overcrowded conditions in which animals are raised prior to slaughter. But these additives do not have to appear on signage or labels. Notwithstanding all of the assurances, we really don't know what adding this stuff to our food supply is doing to us, but it can't be good. Disease-fighting antibiotics are compromised when we eat antibiotic-laden food, and more resistant bacteria strains are

showing up all the time. What to do: Buy organic, especially for young, developing children. Organic farmers are much better to the earth and its creatures in many other ways too.



10) International community.

While the environment is clearly in trouble in the U.S., it's much much worse in many other parts of the world. Very few developing countries have pollution controls to speak of, and so the air, water, and soil are often terribly contaminated. Children, again, are the most vulnerable in these polluted environments. What to do: Generally simplify your life; buy

only what you really need and think carefully about what you allow into you and your family's bodies. Donate the money you save from simplifying to environmental organizations that work on a global level.

This is not at all an exhaustive list of environmental issues, but it's a start. Making just these changes will take significant effort, so don't expect to do it overnight. Implement new ecological measures gradually, but steadily. Don't beat yourself up if you forget to take your cloth bags, but do go back inside to get them. And talk to the people in your circle of



influence about what you're doing and why. Protecting our children by way of preserving our environment is one value that needs to be elevated in the American consciousness.

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