

Campaign focused on reducing inequity created through climate change

The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) recently launched its 'Make It Better' campaign, aimed at protecting children's health from the impacts of climate change.

The campaign was first launched in 2019 and it relaunched late last month to spread awareness on health inequities experienced by children in Canada, said Helen Doyle, OPHA Environmental Health Work Group Chair and New Tecumseth Climate Action member.

In general, children are at an increased risk because of climate change, but now we're understanding even better that the risk isn't equal across or within communities and that many children in Canada live with those inequities that make them more vulnerable to climate risk, Doyle said.

For example, 13 per cent of Canadian children have asthma, but its impact is often dependent on their family's finances.

Within low income communities, children are hospitalized for asthma 1.5 times more often than those who live in high income neighbourhoods, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

This links to climate change because a rising climate means poorer air quality from increased forest fire smoke, dust and pollen, which are all triggers for asthma.

Air pollution is estimated to cause 2.7 million asthma symptom days, 42,500 child acute bronchitis episodes, and 14,600 premature deaths in Canada each year.

If we're seeing greater air pollution those numbers are going to go up. We're also extremely concerned that these communities and children that are affected are those that are already experiencing inequity, Doyle said.

While it may not be a topic of focus presently with winter creeping in, heat-related illnesses are another key issue explored by the 'Make It Better' campaign. It illustrates how heat-related illness will disproportionately impact children and future generations as climate change accelerates.

Children are the most vulnerable to heat stroke and other heat related illnesses; in fact, a 2019 study shows extreme heat was associated with a 22 per cent increase in emergency department visits among children in Southwestern Ontario. Evidence also shows climate change is leading to more extreme heat days and increasing the duration of heat waves.

There's some evidence showing that low income areas have less access to green space, so it's important that we push for policies that will increase green space to reduce extreme heat, Doyle noted.

Depave Paradise initiatives have launched at several schools in Barrie and Aurora, where the pavement is broken up in school yards to allow for the planting of trees and addition of green space.

It's a great way to bring the community together, but also it's a climate change benefit because its ensuring there's less stormwater run off because pavement is impermeable and we get stormwater runoff into rivers and creeks, which is of concern to water quality, Doyle explained.

This initiative is community-led and its at the community level where solutions are often found, she said.

When looking at mental health, as it relates to climate change and inequity, 1 million youth in Canada are affected and hospitalizations for mental disorders in children has increased 60 per cent over the last decade.

“When we think about mental health and climate change, we know that it causes both physical and mental health issues for both children and adults but evidence is showing that children are at increased vulnerability to mental health impacts,” said Doyle.

For everyday people who are trying to assess how they can mitigate their own carbon footprint and contributions to climate change, the “Make It Better” campaign recommends looking at transportation choices, energy use, and choosing a sustainable diet.

Doyle told The Times advocating for sensible policies or initiatives to reduce climate change on a municipal, provincial and federal level is extremely important as well to create a better future.

For anyone interested in looking at ways of combating climate change and inequity or want to learn more about the “Make It Better” campaign can visit www.makeitbetterontario.ca.

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