INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE
PORTLAND AREA
DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES (DEHS)

Children's Environmental Health Program

Children's health includes the study of possible environmental causes of children's illnesses and disorders, as well as the prevention and treatment of environmentally-related disease and injury in children and infants. Children are highly vulnerable to the negative health consequences associated with many environmental exposures. Children receive proportionately larger doses of environmental toxins than adults, and the fact that their organs and tissues are rapidly developing makes them particularly susceptible to chemical insults.

The DEHS is responsible for ensuring environmental health settings for AI/AN children are safe and ultimately provide a healthy environment in which to learn, play, live, and grow. Environmental health issues associated with children are present in housing, schools, Head Start and child care facilities and community settings, and present an ever increasing set of complex challenges to be addressed. A few examples of environmental health related issues of concern are: 1) indoor air quality (IAQ); 2) lead and toxics exposure and; 3) infectious disease control.

RISK ASSESSMENT AND HAZARD CONTROL

The DEHS assesses and inspects environments in which children live, learn, and play in order to identify and control hazards that contribute to illnesses and disease.

- DEHS determines the environmental health status of child-occupied facilities through an inspection program.
    - Reviews of primary and secondary school environmental health programs and comprehensive facility surveys.
    - DEHS provides monitoring, assessment, and program evaluation of schools, Head Start centers, and child care operations to ensure compliance with Federal and Tribal health and safety standards.
    - Inspections and risk assessments result in reports listing findings and recommended corrective actions for improvement of conditions or operations.

ENVIRONMENTAL SURVEILLANCE AND INVESTIGATION

The DEHS gets clinical referrals to provide environmental health consults for children who have moderate to severe or poorly controlled asthma, children who have lead poisoning or elevated blood-lead levels, or other health conditions related to environmental exposures.

Environmental investigations of these cases include assessments of environments to identify hazards and make recommendations for corrective actions to improve the environmental conditions.

In addition, DEHS conducts investigations of gastrointestinal and respiratory disease outbreaks in child care facilities. Outbreak response is coordinated with Tribes, IHS Epidemiology, and the state or local health jurisdiction.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, POLICY DEVELOPMENT, AND STUDY

Research in children's health looks at the effects of air pollution on respiratory diseases such as allergies and asthma, the impact of lead, mercury, and other environmental contaminants on cognitive development and behavior, and the influence of prenatal and early life exposures on growth and development.

The DEHS advises and consults on program planning and policy development related to children's environmental health.

- Development of codes, ordinances, and policies through engaging with Tribal officials and early childhood education committees to encourage adoption of a child care codes.
    - DEHS staff are members of Tribal Head Start Health Services Advisory Committees
- Plan review of new construction for child care centers.
- DEHS provides health and safety training and educational materials on a variety of topics to the parents and staff of education institutions.
- Participate in professional associations in order to network with other agencies throughout the state(s).
- The DEHS is partnering with the Environmental Protection Agency on a project to determine risks related to environmental health conditions of child care centers in Tribal communities. Objectives include qualitative and quantitative data on chemical exposure risks to children and action plans for reducing and preventing exposures and risks.