

One dozen questions and answers

A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission

Threats to child health and well-being

1. What are the principal new threats to child health and their futures identified by the report?

Environmental issues such as climate change and pollution, and related issues of conflict, migration and inequality, constitute major threats to children's rights, health and well-being today and in the future. Children also face increasing exploitation from commercial marketing and social media through promotion of inappropriate and unhealthy foods and drinks (which are contributing to the obesity epidemic), alcohol, tobacco, gambling, exposure to bullying and sexual predators, and inappropriate use of their personal data. Children also suffer greatly from poverty, inadequate social protection and education, unsafe roads and hazardous housing. A number of these threats are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Which environmental threats are affecting children?

Climate change represents an existential threat to all children. Children are the most vulnerable to the lifelong environmental effects caused by climate change arising from greenhouse gas emissions and from pollution of the air, water and land. Children are adversely affected by climate change-generated floods, fires, air pollution, extreme weather, hazardous habitat locations, heat stress and temperature rise, along with related water and food insecurity, emerging infections, the breakdown of ecosystems and forced migration.

3. What should be done to protect children from environmental threats to their health?

The Commission calls for immediate action to stop greenhouse gas emissions to keep warming below 1.5 °C. Currently, it is thought that temperatures could rise by as much as 4.8°C by 2100. High levels of excess CO₂ emissions in any country threaten the futures of all children.

4. How do we prevent childhood obesity?

To protect children now and throughout their lives, we must involve the health sector, of course, but also industry, agriculture, urban planning, environment, transport and other sectors. The report recommends a multisectoral approach to ensure children's health, with political commitment, leadership, management and coordination from the executive level.

Recommendations

5. What must be done to ensure a future for all children?

Overall, countries must urgently implement a new, broader child health and well-being strategy that spans all sectors, as part of a new global movement for children with their participation. Progress can be jump-started with the right leadership, involvement of broader society, and smart policies and investment. Recovery and adaptation to COVID-19 can provide an opportunity to enact policies that will build a better world for children and future generations.

6. What are the report's specific recommendations?

- Urgently cut CO₂, ensuring major and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;
- Centre efforts to achieve sustainable development around children and adolescents;
- Enact new policies and boost investment in all sectors to work towards child health, well-being and rights;
- Incorporate children's perspectives into policy decisions and involve them in conversations about their needs and futures; deliver their entitlements and protect their rights;
- Tighten national regulation of harmful commercial marketing, supported by a new Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Provide high-level national leadership and coordination of all sectors to deliver child health and well-being now and in the future; and
- Generate missing data and set up country dashboards to monitor progress; rank and compare countries internationally.

7. What role should children and adolescents play?

Children and adolescents have demonstrated they can be powerful voices and forces for change. For example, young activists, have invigorated the climate change movement and have pushed for girls' access to education. Children and adolescents, bringing their unique experiences and ideas, must be involved in decisions about policies affecting their current and future health and well-being and in designing solutions to new and emerging challenges. Young people are holding leaders to account, demanding action for past and new commitments.

8. What international measures should be taken regarding climate change?

The Commission strongly supports international treaties and urgent national action that will limit global warming to no more than 1.5°C. The report's unique, new child flourishing and sustainability index ranks countries on these indicators and serves to urge countries who are not doing well on measures of sustainability to reduce carbon emissions to ensure a future for planet and humanity.

9. Which products should be better controlled vis-à-vis children?

Unhealthy foods and beverages, including sugary drinks, fast foods (that contain high amounts of unhealthy fat) and confectionery, alcohol and tobacco and possibly also e-cigarettes are all major causes of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer, and require better regulation. Commercial promotion of formula milk needs to be countered in keeping with the [International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes](#), given that its inappropriate use is associated with lowered intelligence, obesity and greater risk of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. Children's online exposure also creates risks around bullying, gambling, use of personal data, exploitation, and vulnerability to criminals and sexual predators.

10. What international measures should be taken to address harmful commercial marketing?

The commercial threats to children's health are dangerously under-appreciated. Existing global frameworks to protect children from harmful commercial marketing and online exposure, as well as corporate self-regulation, are inadequate. The Commissioners recommend that stronger regulation at national level should be supported by a legally-binding treaty, adopted by the UN General Assembly in the form of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to curb harmful commercial marketing. New international regulatory frameworks are needed to address the transnational aspects of the child health problem—such as international marketing of harmful products — and drive national action and accountability for protection.

Financing

11. Is investing in children a good investment?

The Commission report suggested that investing in children is among the best investments a society can make. The ethical rationale for investing in children's health, education and development is irrefutable, as is the economic case: expenditures on children are characterized by high benefit-cost ratios. For every US\$ 1 spent for many interventions, there's up to US\$ 20 benefit to society, and these investments have lifelong and inter-generational benefits.

Get involved

12. How can I support the Commission and help create a new movement for children?

You can further familiarize yourself with the [A future for the world's children?](#) report and its recommendations and take action accordingly in your communities; listen to children and vote for politicians who care about the issues raised and operate according to science and evidence.

Children and young people can, by working together and getting organized in their local communities, demand action on climate change, clean air, play spaces and physical activity facilities; access to nutritious, healthy diets; and protection from harmful commercial practices.