

Children are not Miniature Adults

A new voice at Improving Kids' Environment

by *Diana J. Ensign*

Janet McCabe, a Harvard Law School graduate with more than a decade devoted to environmental air quality work in Indiana, is the new executive director of Improving Kids' Environment (IKE). IKE is an Indianapolis nonprofit organization working to reduce environmental threats to children's health.

As McCabe says, "Children are not just miniature adults. They are more vulnerable because they are still developing. We need to pay attention to their needs in a special way."

IKE, first established in 1999, is concerned with those things in the environment that affect children. McCabe says IKE's goal is "Healthy homes, healthy schools and healthy communities." Samples of children's health issues IKE tackles are lead-based paint, asthma, elevated radon levels, and pollution in the creeks from the combined sewer overflow problem and air quality.

For the home, she explains that some environmental health problems are structural and some are housekeeping. For instance, with asthma, a key trigger might be mold in the house or apartment from moisture. "Cockroaches are another issue, but cockroaches won't be there if there's not water for them." If a building has water leaks, that would require a structural repair. If there is pet dander or dust mites in the carpet, that would be a housekeeping issue. With asthma, she says, avoid scented candles, avoid smoking in the house or apartment, and get rid of excessive standing water and moisture in the home.

Another common home health issue is radon. "It's a naturally occurring gas that is colorless and odorless so people are not aware of it, but it's linked to lung cancer. Estimates are that one-third of houses in Indianapolis — if tested — would be found to have elevated radon levels." When testing shows high radon levels, there are treatment systems that can be put into place to lower the levels.

IKE is putting together a pilot program for radon testing in lower income homes on the Eastside of Indianapolis. Likewise, IKE has various projects dealing with lead-based paint. Lead-based paint can cause permanent neurological damage for very young children. But exposure is preventable. As McCabe says, "There's no reason why a child in Indianapolis, in 2005, should be at risk of lead-based paint poisoning."

IKE is also active in the schools. McCabe notes, "IKE has worked with schools to have air quality inspections done by the State Board of Health and has pushed for better policies so that people can raise health issues to school administrators and get something done about it." Mold, for instance, is a maintenance issue for the schools. Another school and community issue IKE addresses is diesel emissions from idling school buses. The City of Indianapolis and Indianapolis Public Schools are working on retrofitting the school buses, municipal diesel vehicles and IndyGo buses with converters to reduce pollution. McCabe says a volunteer policy is in place to limit idling for school buses, but such a policy is needed for municipal vehicles, business fleets and the average driver. Even for people who are at a drive-through, it is better to turn off your engine while in a long line and re-start it than it is to sit and idle. "After 10 seconds, you emit more pollution in a drive-through by idling than if you simply turn the car off." Another school and home issue is pesticide application. "Less pesticide application and getting the info to parents is important." McCabe says IKE wants to make information available to the public so that people can make informed choices about health issues.

In addition to the work at a hand, McCabe's dream for IKE is to make it survive as a nonprofit by building a more stable funding base and becoming a strong, active voice that people can rely on into the future. As she says, "There are lots of pieces to the environmental movement and there are never enough of us doing this type of work. For IKE, the idea is that if you improve the health of children, you improve it for everyone."

Volunteer help and financial support are needed to ensure IKE continues as a strong voice for children's health in Indiana.

For more info:

<http://www.ikecoalition.org/>

This article originally appeared in Nuvo Newspaper. Find it online at :

<http://www.nuvo.net/indianapolis/children-are-not-miniature-adults/Content?oid=1205135>
