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The new EU Health & Environment Strategy
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Janek is three years old and lives in Warsaw. He is a typical three-year old boy. He is lively, he
 touches everything he sees and he loves it when his mother takes him for a walk. Janek's mother too
 is very much like any other mother of a three-year old. She keeps an eye on him all the time,
 protecting him from all kinds of dangers. "Don't touch the iron it's hot! Don't run into the road you'll
 get run over! Don't lean out of the window you might fall!"

Does any of that sound familiar?
But what Janek's mother does not know is that her child is also exposed to dangers she cannot
 even see.

Even before birth, in his mother's womb, Janek was exposed to hazardous substances, which had
 accumulated in her body and which she continued to absorb from air, water and food while she was
 still pregnant.

After birth, dangerous substances reached Janek in his mother's milk. Then, when he began
 crawling, Janek breathed in dust and soil that were full of toxins.

Even when he is out with his mother in the streets of Warsaw, Janek is more exposed to health
 risks than she is. When he is sitting in his buggy or walking alongside her, car emissions blow
directly into his face.

Janek's life has just started, and he is already under attack from environmental hazards. And
 there are more in store for him as he gets older.

The story about Janek shows why it is so important that you are here today. To create a
 healthier environment for our children really matters to me. And I know it does for you as well. It is
 a difficult task, which requires the steady commitment and close cooperation of everyone involved.
 I would therefore, first of all, like to welcome you to this conference. It is here in Poland that we
 will start our work together with the aim of better protecting our children from environmental
 hazards.

We know that environmental risk factors have an adverse impact on human health, and in
 particular on that of our children. Preliminary estimates by the WHO suggest that almost one third
 of the global burden of disease can be attributed to environmental factors. Over 40% of this burden
 falls on children under five years of age, even though they make up only about 10% of the world's
 population.

Children are particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards. Not only are they more exposed
to pollutants, like Janek, because they are small and closer to the ground. Children also breathe
more air, drink more water and eat more food than adults, relative to their body volume. In addition,
their nervous, respiratory and reproductive systems are very sensitive since they are not fully
developed.

Health statistics are showing a dramatic increase in childhood diseases associated with
environmental factors. In Europe, one child in seven suffers from asthma. This number has tripled
compared with what it was 30 years ago. In some European countries, one child in four suffers from
an allergy. Cases of leukaemia, the most common form of childhood cancer, have also become more frequent.

However, the exact relationship and interaction between the environment and health is unknown. We have a fairly good understanding of the cause-effect relationship for many single pollutants in air and water, but we do not know which health effects are caused by complex, real-life exposure to a combination of risk factors.

The conclusion we have drawn is that we must expand the scope of environmental action, ranging from the health implications of low-level exposure over a period of time to the cocktail effects of a number of different pollutants.

That is why the European Commission in June this year launched a new European strategy for Environment and Health, which focuses specially on children.

Since we are entering uncharted territory that involves two usually separated policy areas - environment and health - we have to work across and between traditional policy areas. This is reflected by the fact that the “Environment and Health Strategy” was presented jointly by the Commissioner for Health, David Byrne, by the Commissioner for Research, Philippe Busquin, and by myself, in my capacity as Commissioner for Environment.

The ultimate objectives of this strategy are to reduce the burden of disease caused by environmental factors in the EU - including the new member countries as of next year. We need to identify and to prevent new health threats caused by environmental factors and to strengthen the EU's capacity for policy-making in this area.