

# Growing Up Green

## Raising healthy, happy kids

BY MARC KIELBURGER

**I**n the work that Craig and I have done with youth of all ages, we've learned that the spark to make a difference can come from anywhere. Mine came from looking under the kitchen sink, of all places. I was in Grade 8 and stumped about what to do for a science fair project. My mom suggested I take a break and help with some chores. I was less than enthusiastic, but at least it wasn't science homework.

As I hauled out the cleaning products, the words on the bottles caught my attention: *danger, caution, hazardous*. Bottle after bottle also bore the telltale symbol of a skull and crossbones. Right then I found the perfect excuse to get out of cleaning – how could anybody clean with chemicals that were harmful to his health? – and the subject of my science project.

I went to see my grandma, whose wisdom was only matched by her baking abilities. We sat in her kitchen and I asked if she used cleaning products full of chemicals when she was my age. To my surprise, she told me people used things such as vinegar and baking soda. I was curious to see whether safe ingredients could really work. I began my investigation and eventually got permission to use a science lab at a local university to test various recipes.

That year I placed first in my school's science fair and went on to win best project in Canada. From there The Heinz Co. printed a booklet based on my project filled with recipes for alternative

home cleaners and distributed it with purchases of vinegar. I became a young advocate for environmental awareness, speaking to groups and collecting names on a petition calling for better labels on carcinogenic cleaning products. It was then that I realized that even as a young person I could really make a difference. And your kids can, too.

The environment is a natural concern for children. While issues such as poverty may be abstract, they understand nature because it is a part of their everyday lives. In fact, a lifelong passion for environmentalism often comes with early exposure to nature. A study released last



➤ **Almost 60 per cent of youth are optimistic about solving environmental issues in their lifetime; 77 per cent of adults think youth can make a positive difference.**

Source: 2006 War Child Canada Youth Opinion Poll

year by Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., shows that children who play in the woods, go camping, hiking and fishing, and engage in other outdoor activities, especially before age 11, are more likely to protect the environment as adults.

Educating children about the environment is more important than ever, and it's not tough. Kids can learn to recycle and make daily choices that have the least impact on the environment. Environmentalism is also often the precursor to caring about other issues that will encourage children to look beyond their own needs. And nurturing these qualities is as simple as stepping outside your door and instilling a love for the natural world they will one day inherit.

*Craig and Marc Kielburger are the founders of Free the Children and coauthors of Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World (Simon and Schuster, 2006) and Me to We: Turning Self-Help on Its Head (John Wiley, 2004).*

### Get in the Act: Next Steps

- 1 Plan weekly outdoor activities with your family and take the time to enjoy nature together.
- 2 Encourage your kids to come up with their own ideas on how everyone can be more environmentally friendly in your household.
- 3 Plan a community clean-up day at the local park. Encourage your child to take the lead.