

Going Green for Healthy, Safe Children

You care deeply for young children and work hard every day to facilitate their health and development. One of the health areas you may have questions about is how to make your childcare setting “green” in an effort to improve the health and safety of the children in your care.

Evidence is building that suggests conditions commonly found in early childcare settings may have serious impact on the health and well-being of young children in childcare settings. Toys children play with, the carpets they lie on, or the air they breathe may expose them to chemicals that have a negative impact on their health.

What Is “Green” in Early Childcare Programs?

A green early childcare program is environmentally friendly and takes steps to provide a healthy and safe space. A green program takes measures to eliminate or reduce exposure to toxins and contaminants (such as pesticides or harsh cleaning products) and to known health challenges (such as respiratory irritants or allergens). A green program also practices sustainability by managing resources and preventing and reducing waste.

There are many environmental health and safety factors to consider in your early childcare setting. Two common areas of concern are cleaning products and air quality.

Cleaners and Disinfectants

Proper cleaning in the childcare setting may reduce pest problems such as rodents and ants. It may also minimize disease outbreak. Maintaining a clean environment may result in less of a need for pesticides and harsh chemicals.

Cleaners and disinfectants can have a negative impact on children’s health if they are carelessly selected, mixed inappropriately, or stored within reach of children. The health concerns most frequently associated with cleaning products are chemical burns to the skin, eyes, and respiratory system.

There also is a growing concern about potential links from cleaning and disinfectant chemicals to cancer, hormone disruption, neurological damage, asthma, allergies, sensitivity reactions, and other chronic health problems. According to the Healthy Schools Campaign, continuous, low-level exposure to fumes, scents, solvents, and the pesticidal properties of cleaners and disinfectants may damage the delicate and developing immune system of an infant or young child.

Greener, safer cleaning alternatives include kitchen-grade materials (such as dish soap, baking soda, and vinegar) and scent-free, chlorine-free, phosphate-free commercial products that have been recognized by rigorous third-party evaluations that screen for human and environmental safety.

Air Quality Management

Indoor air quality refers to the presence of indoor airborne compounds that may compromise the health or well-being of the children in your program. Indoor air quality is generally worse than outdoor air quality due to the daily accumulation of carbon dioxide, chemicals released from household materials, airborne bacteria or viruses, pet dander, and dust.

With more than one in 15 children and adults suffering from asthma, poor indoor air quality leads to absent employees, sick children, and lost efficiency in your childcare program. Approximately 40,000 U.S. adults and children will miss school, childcare, or work each day because of asthma-related illnesses.

The easiest solutions for poor indoor air quality are ventilation and the elimination of highly scented indoor chemicals often found in cleaning products and air fresheners. A well-functioning filtration system will be important to the welfare of those in your care if your childcare facility is downwind from, or your ventilation intake is adjacent to sources of pollen, mold, busy intersections or exhaust sources, cultivated fields, or industrial exhaust sources.

For family childcare settings, filtration systems may be cost prohibitive. But you can help with ventilation by using your kitchen or bathroom exhaust fans, making sure air conditioning and heating vents or filters are clean, and using environmentally friendly household cleaning products.

Measuring Your Setting's Environmental Health

The first step in preventing children's exposure to hazardous conditions is to identify and understand the practices and products used in your early childcare setting. The best and most informative way to do this is to measure your setting's environmental health with an inclusive, research-based rating scale designed specifically for early childcare settings.

A comprehensive rating scale will cover the following elements:

- Air quality management
- Cleaning products and practices
- Pests and pesticide management
- Exposure to chemicals found in plastics
- Chemicals found in soaps, lotions, and sunscreen
- Exposure to lead and other contaminants such as formaldehyde, mercury, and fire retardants
- Green living and stewardship, including recycling, organic food, and evaluating your carbon footprint

A high-quality rating scale will also recommend that you perform ongoing physical inspections of your childcare facility, as conditions may change over time that lead to unexpected health challenges such as improperly stored cleaners, unauthorized pesticides, or mold problems.

While simple environmental health checklists are able to provide basic information on green standards, they tend to lack the in-depth background needed to fully understand what is safe, environmentally friendly, and healthy in early childcare settings.

Green Living and Stewardship

Caring for children includes caring for the world they are growing up in. Part of your impact on their future is determined by how you manage resources, mentor children, and encourage green practices in your childcare setting and your community.

If children in your childcare program participate in gardening, recycling, enjoying fresh-air spaces, and cleaning dishes instead of throwing them away, the routines established may benefit their health and the environment for generations to come. Similarly, negative behaviors such as energy waste, product waste, or exposing children to second-hand smoke may also pattern young children for their lifetimes.

Your unique relationship with families also allows you to share useful information. Imagine in 10 years the positive impact of thousands of early childcare professionals and millions of young children learning to live green, simply by recycling a few more items and switching to greener products. The power of your positive influence and a simple act cannot be underestimated.

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Internet Resources

Go Green Rating Scale for Early Childhood Settings, www.gogreenratingscale.org

Green Seal, www.greenseal.org

Healthy Schools Campaign--Green Clean Schools, www.healthyschoolscampaign.org

National Geographic Green Guide, www.thegreenguide.com

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Design for the Environment, www.epa.gov/df

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