

# **SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTAL CHOICES FOR CHILDREN**

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We know through new research that children's health is connected to their environment. Children spend up to 10-12 hours daily in a childcare setting. The childcare environment can have a dramatic effect on children's health. While many childhood ailments and diseases have a genetic component, it is the effect of the child's environment that can trigger an illness.

Children are physically smaller than adults yet they breathe more air per pound and spend most of their time at the floor level where risk is the highest. Children are uniquely more vulnerable.

When renovating, selecting appliances or purchasing building materials, being a good consumer for children's health means making wise choices for children, staff and the planet. While making healthy choices may seem more expensive in the beginning, in the end you will make up your savings in less energy consumption, less staff sick days and healthier children. A study performed in 2006 by the American Institute of Architects called *Greening America's Schools* proved the above benefits and showed that a 2% cost increase in up-front materials could have a 20x financial benefit by life cycling the cost of the building.

## **Building Materials**

Indoor air quality should be of great concern in a childcare environment. Few centers have windows that open for on-going ventilation so the air is trapped in the building. Children have developing neurological systems and brains that can be affected by toxins. The use of low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) materials such as paint, adhesives, caulking and carpeting can improve indoor air quality. In other words, think of buying products without the new product smell.

Building materials should be purchased that are certified by an independent lab that the materials are safe, non-toxic, and non-polluting. Otherwise, you are relying upon the manufacturer to provide reliable information. As we have learned from the import companies whose toys contained lead, not all companies put children's health first.

Green Guard Environmental Institute has created a rating system for products that are safe to be used with children. Their web site, [www.greenguard.org](http://www.greenguard.org), can be a good resource to you in locating healthy building, renovation or construction products.

When purchasing furniture, ask the manufacturer to provide you with information about how the product was finished. Stick with wood products that have been sealed with a formaldehyde-free product and will not off gas. Since California has passed legislation banning the use of formaldehyde, manufacturers are becoming more comfortable with consumers asking for product finish information.

## **Resource Conservation**

The United States is very wasteful when it comes to water consumption. Many communities are currently rationing water use. Leaking faucets and toilets use excessive water. Where possible, think about using

water-conserving fixtures such as 1.5 gallons per minute faucet aerations or 1.5 gallon per flush toilets. While these expenditures might seem costly, they will save you dollars in water consumption. The same statement is true about electronic eye sinks that turn off automatically when not in use.

Childcare centers spend more on energy than any other expenses except for personnel. Any new appliances purchased should have a sticker for its Energy Star rating. This yellow tag created for consumers is a reliable and valid third party rating system of energy efficient appliances. The system was created by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the US Department of Energy. ENERGY STAR, <http://www.energystar.gov/building> helps you to make energy efficient choices.

Another resource to use is Energy Smart Schools, <http://www1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/energysmartschools/>

This website was created to help schools renovate and build wisely. There you can download several guides to help you better understand energy conservation and guide you in the design of an energy efficient center.

### **Lead Exposure**

Lead is a toxic material that was used for years in the building industry. Lead may cause a range of health effects, from behavioral problems to learning disabilities, to seizures and death. Children under the age of six are at the most risk.

The most common sources of lead poisoning is deteriorating lead-based paint, lead contaminated dust and contaminated soil. The Environmental Protection Agency website, [www.epa.gov/lead](http://www.epa.gov/lead), can provide you with further information on renovating and/or painting a child care center that has lead based paint. The EPA booklet, *Renovate Right: Important Lead Hazard Information for Families Child Care Providers and Schools*, can easily be downloaded. Beginning in April 2010, federal law will require contractors that work with centers built before 1978 to be certified and to follow specific work practices to prevent lead contamination.

While the Consumer Product Safety Act of 2009 was passed to prevent further sale of lead tainted toys in our country, no such requirements apply to indoor and/or outdoor building materials. Nationwide and in Canada, childcare providers had to replace the synthetic grass that they had purchased for their playgrounds when it tested positive for lead. Homeowners have had to rebuild their houses when they discovered tainted dry wall that was imported from China in their homes. These are all good reasons to again ask for third party certification of any products and/or materials you will use.

Making wise decisions on where to spend your valuable renovation monies can save you money as well as protect the health of the children you serve. Such conscious choices are also healthier for our planet!

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