

Protecting Children's Health



Disturbing Increases in Childhood Diseases

BE SAFE: Take Precautionary Action to Protect Our Children's Health

BE SAFE's FOUR PRINCIPLES

1. HEED EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Many parents, teachers, health practitioners and scientific researchers are worried about the growing trend of childhood diseases. Chemicals in our everyday environments—such as our home drinking water or school indoor air—likely play a role in these alarming statistics. Health investigators are undertaking studies to better understand the link between an increase in a disease and a specific type of exposure.

While the science on environmental health is young, and there is much we do not yet know about the harm to children from chemical exposures, we do know enough to act. Substantial research has shown *lead* reduces children's intelligence and causes neurological problems. [Needleman 1994]. Certain persistent toxic chemicals, such as *dioxin*, reach the baby while still in the mother's womb and can cause learning disabilities, a weakened immune system (more ear infections for instance) and cancer. [APDR 1999].

Over a billion pounds of neurotoxins (chemicals that can affect a child's brain) are released annually by industrial facilities, contaminating our children's air, water and food. This does not include those to which we are exposed from everyday products which are not generally labeled. Some neurotoxins are applied intentionally. Schools, for example, often use *pesticides* on a routine basis exposing children to dangerous chemical residues on floors and athletic fields. Numerous scientists believe many diseases and learning problems may be related to children's exposure to chemicals. [GBPSR 2000; Needleman 1994].

Growing childhood diseases and disabilities could have a devastating impact on our nation and future generations. [CPOC 2001]. How can we address the growing numbers of children who are sick or unable to reach their full intellectual potential? Heed these early warning signs, and prevent toxic exposures by taking a precautionary approach.

- Childhood cancer continues to increase and is the number one disease-related cause of death in children. [ALA 1998]. Children up to four years of age show increases of 53% in brain and other nervous system cancers, and 32% in kidney and urinary system cancers from 1973 to 1995.
- Female teenagers ages 15 to 19 experienced a 78% increase in ovarian cancer; male teens experienced a 65% increase in testicular cancer; and all teens saw a 128% increase in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma from 1973 to 1995. [NCI 1998].
- Childhood learning disabilities, hyperactive behavior and the inability to maintain attention have soared nationwide. The number of children in special education programs increased 191% from 1977 to 1994. [GBPSR 2000].
- Asthma afflicts nearly 4.8 million U.S. children. Asthma rates among children under 5 years of age increased 160% between 1980 and 1994, and by 74% among children 5 to 14 years of age. It is the leading cause of school absenteeism and hospital admissions (for chronic conditions.) [ALA 1998].

2. PUT SAFETY FIRST

America has a long-established history of taking a preventative approach to diseases. Women are careful about what they eat and drink during pregnancy, and children are immunized against disease and take vitamins. Preventative approaches to protect our children from exposure to environmental chemicals should be no different. Children are more vulnerable and chemically-sensitive than adults. A small amount of toxic chemicals in their drinking water, air or food can cause serious and permanent harm.

3. EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Government and industry decision-making on chemical exposures and children's health needs the active participation of people, especially parents, concerned about children's safety and health. Independent scientific research should inform the public discussion on the best policies to safeguard our children. Children depend on adults to take action and vote for candidates who give priority to protecting children from exposures to harmful environmental chemicals.

Many groups are working to protect children's health by reducing children's exposure to toxic chemicals and other health hazards in schools and homes. Communities facing direct health threats to children in school, such as asbestos, lead, toxic mold, pesticide exposure, or pollution from hazardous chemicals beneath or near school grounds are taking action. People form a group, investigate the problem, and develop a plan to convince decision makers to do the right thing and solve the problem.

For instance, we need to ensure that new schools are built on uncontaminated sites. Often, zoning laws restrict building residential or business property on a contaminated area, but permit schools to be built on such property, despite the fact that children are more vulnerable to toxics than adults. We need to create state and national laws to set more stringent school siting requirements, to ensure healthier schools for the future.

You can help schools become healthier places for kids by participating in programs on school environmental issues such as indoor air quality, non-toxic products, and integrated pest management.

We choose the precautionary approach to protect our health and environment for ourselves and future generations.

The Environmental Health Alliance and the BE SAFE Platform is coordinated by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. Contact us at CHEJ, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040, 703-237-2249 or visit www.besafenet.com

4. CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTIONS

■ Does your Child's School Use Toxic Cleaners & Pesticides?

Ask! Urge them to use nontoxic methods and contact your local parent, teacher or student group. For information, contact three national groups at:

www.childproofing.org
www.beyondpesticides.org and
www.healthyschools.org

■ Use Non-Toxic Products.

Avoid using toxic chemicals in your home or on your lawn. Use non-toxic cleaners and natural lawn care products. For more information, contact www.checnet.org and www.cehn.org

■ Find Out about Local Toxic Hazards.

Investigate industrial air pollution or toxic sites near your home or your child's daycare center or school. For more information, contact www.scorecard.org

■ BE SAFE.

Sign onto the Be Safe Platform. Be counted when we deliver this national petition to the White House in 2005. Endorse the Be Safe Platform today at www.besafenet.com

■ Your Vote Counts.

The next election will set the country's course on policies to protect children from chemicals hazards. For information on candidate's environmental voting records, contact www.sierraclub.org and www.lcv.org. To register to vote, contact www.earthday.net.

A Civil Action

Polluted Water Linked to Children's Leukemia Community Successfully Advocates for Clean Drinking Water Supply

Donna's son Robbie suffered and died from childhood leukemia while living in Woburn, Massachusetts, a working-class city north of Boston. A terrible tragedy happened in this sleepy suburban neighborhood, which years later became well known through the book and movie entitled *A Civil Action*.

One mother of a sick child did a neighborhood survey and found an unusual cluster of children with leukemia who were all drinking from the same city well. Working with local church leaders, she and other concerned parents began the long struggle to investigate whether their water was contaminated with toxic chemicals. This effort to demonstrate the connection between polluted drinking water and childhood cancer led to the closure of the well and the cleanup of industrial property used by W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods.

A lawsuit was filed and families received some compensation. But no amount of money will bring back the innocent children who died, nor will it excuse the behavior of government officials. Agencies demanded absolute proof of a connection between the contaminated water and children's leukemia before taking action. Parents urged a precautionary approach—close the polluted well and investigate the leukemia cluster. If precautionary steps had been taken, the toxic exposures could have been eliminated and perhaps some children would not have become sick or died.

“We knew the water was making our children sick. But no one would listen to us.”

**Donna Robbins
Woburn, MA**

References

American Lung Assoc., 1998, *Trends in Asthma Morbidity and Mortality*; Greater Boston Physicians For Social Responsibility, *In Harms Way: Toxic Threats To Children's Development*; National Cancer Inst., 1998 *SEER Cancer Statistic Review*; CA Dept. Hlth. & Human Serv., *Changes in the Population of Persons With Autism*; Needleman, H., *Raising Children Toxic Free*; CHEJ, *American People's Dioxin Report*; CPOC, *Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions* 2001.

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Environmental Health Alliance

BE SAFE Platform

In the 21st century, we envision a world in which our food, water and air are clean, and our children grow up healthy and thrive. Everyone needs a protected, safe community and workplace, and natural environment to enjoy. We can make this world vision a reality. The tools we bring to this work are prevention, safety, responsibility and democracy.

Our goal is to prevent pollution and environmental destruction before it happens. We support this precautionary approach because it is preventive medicine for our environment and health. It makes sense to:

- *Prevent pollution and make polluters, not taxpayers, pay and assume responsibility for the damage they cause;*
- *Protect our children from chemical and radioactive exposures to avoid illness and suffering;*
- *Promote use of safe, renewable, non-toxic technologies;*
- *Provide a natural environment we can all enjoy with clean air, swimmable, fishable water and stewardship for our national forests.*

*We choose a “better safe than sorry” approach motivated by caution and prevention.
We endorse the common-sense approach outlined in the Blueprint’s four principles listed below.*

Platform Principles

HEED EARLY WARNINGS

Government and industry have a duty to prevent harm, when there is credible evidence that harm is occurring or is likely to occur—even when the exact nature and full magnitude of harm is not yet proven.

PUT SAFETY FIRST

Industry and government have a responsibility to thoroughly study the potential for harm from a new chemical or technology before it is used—rather than assume it is harmless until proven otherwise. We need to ensure it is safe now, or we will be sorry later. Research on impacts to workers and the public needs to be confirmed by independent third parties.

EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Precautionary decisions place the highest priority on protecting health and the environment, and help develop cleaner technologies and industries with effective safeguards and enforcement. Government and industry decisions should be based on meaningful citizen input and mutual respect (the golden rule), with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected and for our irreplaceable natural resources—not for those with financial interests. Uncompromised science should inform public policy.

CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Decision-making by government, industry and individuals must include an evaluation of alternatives, and the choice of the safest, technically feasible solutions. We support innovation and promotion of technologies and solutions that create a healthy environment and economy, and protect our natural resources.

Take precautionary action to protect our children’s health. Sign onto the BE SAFE Platform.

Be counted when we deliver this national platform to the White House in 2005. Endorse the platform today at www.besafenet.com

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