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“Seven Worst” List Highlights Dangerous Toxins Found in Schools

And Outlines Seven Easy Steps to Reduce Kids’ Exposure

Manhattan Beach, Calif. (Aug. 22, 2011)— Toxic chemicals lurk in nearly every classroom in America, and parents and educators can learn how to eliminate them, says Grades of Green, a new non-profit group that helps parents and students implement environmental education and conservation practices in schools.

Grades of Green’s “Seven Worst” list includes toxic substances found in things many schools use every day—cleaning products, fertilizers, pesticides, anti-microbial products, fabrics—even school furniture. These substances may be deemed safe at certain levels in individual products, but no one knows their effects when children are exposed to dozens of products simultaneously and over time. Several of the chemicals can trigger asthma and have been linked to many health problems including ADHD.

“Most parents—even teachers—don’t even realize how many toxic chemicals their children are exposed to at school,” says Grades of Green Director Kim Martin. “The combined exposure from so many products can’t be good for our kids, especially when the incidence of asthma is rising and causes so many absences.

“Parents and teachers often believe chemicals used in everyday products are regulated and tested for toxicity. They are not,” says Martin. “Of the 84,000 chemicals used in commerce, only *five* have been restricted by the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). TSCA favors manufacturers, so the EPA has been unable to restrict even asbestos. Responsibility for protecting our children falls to parents and teachers.”

Grades of Green outlines simple steps for parents and educators on its website, www.gradesofgreen.org. Parents can register their schools online—at no cost—to get instructions on reducing harmful classroom chemicals, plus dozens of other ways to help the environment.

“As a mother, I wanted to learn how to reduce toxins in my child’s school,” said Andrea Krohn, a parent at Grand View Elementary in Manhattan Beach, Calif. “Grades of Green’s website gave me step-by-step directions for navigating the school system and encouraging them to take steps to eliminate toxins.”

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Grades of Green's "Seven Worst" List

Of the hundreds of chemicals children are exposed to, Grades of Green chose to highlight the following seven, based on scientific consensus of their potential harm, likelihood of exposure at school, and low parent-awareness levels.

1. Triclosan—This antibacterial agent is a suspected thyroid and estrogen hormone disruptor and brain signal disruptor. It has become a ubiquitous addition to anti-bacterial and anti-microbial products and is found not only soaps, but laundry and dish detergent, toys, playground and exercise equipment, facial tissues, tiles and grout, toilet seats, plastic kitchen utensils, phones, toothbrushes, toothpaste and many other items.

2. Bisphenol-A (BPA)—BPA is used in metal food-can linings, and to make clear or hard polycarbonate plastics including toys, lunchboxes and reusable water bottles. It is strongly suspected to be an endocrine disruptor, carcinogen, and chromosomal- and neuro-toxin. Children and pregnant women are especially susceptible.

3. Phthalates—Phthalates are a group of industrial chemicals used to make plastics like PVC. They are in a wide range of products from toys to food packaging to shower curtains to hair spray and shampoo. Floor finishers and window cleaners used in classrooms often contain phthalates. Phthalates disrupt the endocrine system. Several phthalate compounds have caused abnormalities in the reproductive systems of male test animals, and some studies also link phthalates to liver cancer, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control's 2005 National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals.¹

4. Organophosphates—These neurotoxins cause headaches, dizziness, and disorientation, and asthma in the short-term, and they have been linked to ADHD and Parkinson's disease over the long-term. They are commonly used as pesticides in termite and mosquito control as well as farming.

5. Chlorine—Chlorine is often used in the manufacture of paper, paper towels, cloth, pesticides and solvents, as well as in cleaning supplies. It can aggravate and trigger childhood asthma.

6. Formaldehyde—Formaldehyde is an eye, respiratory and skin-irritant as well as a developmental and reproductive toxin. It may be found in disinfectants, fungicides and germicides used in cleaning supplies. It is often used to make adhesives, air fresheners, particleboard and plywood, paints, plastics and permanent press finishes to fabrics bedding, clothing and draperies.

7. Ammonia—Ammonia is a skin and lung irritant and can induce asthma attacks. It is used in most fertilizers and in many cleaning products often used in schools.

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¹ <http://www.ewg.org/chemindex/term/480>

How to Reduce Kids' Exposure

To reduce children's exposure, Grades of Green recommends that parents and teachers take the following actions:

1. To reduce exposure to chlorine, formaldehyde, triclosan, phthalates and ammonia, ask school administrators to specify non-toxic or Green Seal certified cleaning products, paper products, and hand cleansers. For pointers, see Grades of Green's green cleaning supplies activity at www.gradesofgreen.org/initiatives/r3-project/green-cleaning-supplies.
2. Discontinue the use of air fresheners and cleaning products that contain artificial fragrances.
3. Inform teachers of the dangers of antibacterial agents and encourage the use of simple soap and water to disinfect hands, surfaces and toys.
4. Sustainable natural woods, which do not contain formaldehyde, should be specified for desks and chairs. Alternatively, administrators could allow new manufactured wood products and fabrics to sit unused in a well-ventilated area for a couple of weeks before bringing them into the classroom.
5. Work with school officials to develop an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) plan that eliminates or at least reduces organophosphates and chlorine. Ask school administrators to eliminate plant fertilizers or specify those that are ammonia-free. For help, read Grades of Green's how-to's at www.gradesofgreen.org/initiatives/r3-project/pesticides.

If such chemicals are used, insist on notification of pest control treatment and remove your child from schools when pesticides or fertilizers are applied, especially if your child has asthma or ADHD.

6. Manufacturers are replacing BPAs in plastic with other chemicals that may be equally or more harmful. To reduce exposure, use stainless steel or glass water bottles for your child. Ask your school lunch suppliers to use BPA-free canned goods.

7. Ask your local, state and national representatives to support legislation such as the Safe Chemicals Act of 2011.

Grades of Green is a national non-profit organization that inspires and empowers kids and the broader school community to care for the environment. It has been honored with many awards, including the U.S. EPA's prestigious Environmental Award. Grades of Green is growing rapidly, with nearly 40,000 students in 13 states enrolled. Its goal is to enroll thousands of schools with millions of kids—all caring for the environment and collectively making a huge impact. For more information, visit www.gradesofgreen.org or contact Melissa Bailey at 310-465-5647 or 310-955-7199.