

# Non-toxic preschools

## You can find and eliminate environmental hazards in your early care and education program

By Eve Pearlman

A couple of years back, Susan JunFish was searching for a preschool in Contra Costa County. She was looking for a place where her son Benjamin, now four, would be happy, comfortable—and healthy.

What she found frightened her.

“School after school was basically exposing kids to hazardous materials without realizing it,” says JunFish, who used to work for the Environmental Protection Agency. At one well-regarded school, she recalls, a ceiling containing asbestos—a material that causes severe lung disease—had been cut open and left uncovered. At another, children were polishing silver with a toxic cleaner, as children at that school had done for 15 years. At yet another, a maintenance worker was scraping several layers of paint—paint that could contain lead—off the school building while school was in session.

“If it had been just one or two schools,” says JunFish, “I probably wouldn’t have dealt with it.” But she found significant environmental hazards at nearly half of the almost 20 schools she visited. In August 2002, she founded the nonprofit Parents for a Safer Environment because “I wanted to teach people how to make preschools safer.”

Children’s developing bodies are more vulnerable to toxins than those of adults, says JunFish. And they’re more likely to get toxins into their bodies. Their hands are on everything and then go in their mouths—an average of ten times an hour, according to one study.

JunFish did some checking and found out that neither preschool administrators nor state licensing inspectors are trained to identify and correct environmental hazards. “I was told they’re just too short-staffed and under-budgeted,” she says.

So last May, with the help of a grant from the Contra Costa Child Care Council, JunFish hosted a full-day conference, “Environmental Hazards in Pre-Schools,” for parents, child care providers and administrators. She personally invited the directors of the centers she’d visited with the worst health and safety violations. “I started this work because I couldn’t believe what was happening in preschools—there’s a huge lack of resources and information,” says JunFish. “I know that those in the field love children, and if they knew more, they’d be giving them the best environment.”



Susan JunFish with her son Benjamin.

### FOR A SAFER PRESCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

#### Monitor your maintenance and avoid common hazards

**Asbestos.** When JunFish visited the school with exposed asbestos, it turned out that school director knew there was asbestos in the ceiling. She even knew she needed a certified contractor to handle it—but the plumber who cut the hole did not. With no set procedure for construction projects, there’d been a breakdown in communication. “It was terrible,” says JunFish. “Four-year-olds were having class under the hole.”

**Lead.** Lead-based paint was banned in 1978, but old cracking and peeling paint is still the leading source of childhood lead poisoning, which is the most common environmental disease for children under six. Dust from old chipping and peeling paint gets in the air and can settle elsewhere, in the soil near the school for example, or in the dust on window sills. “Lead can be anywhere,” says Marsha Sherman of the Child Care Health Program in Berkeley, and a long-time health educator. “And you know how kids like to stand at the windows and chew on the window sills.”

To control lead, keep your facility clean—wiping down with a wet rag will do the trick—and have any remodeling work done by a professional who will test for lead and then contain it. Schools should also test playground soil for lead. Dirt around buildings often has a high lead content from paint chips that have crumbled into the soil. If you find that the dirt around your building has a high lead content, you can plant dense shrubs there so the children will not play in the dirt.

#### Tips for cleaning

##### Use less—or no—bleach.

Many child care providers and even some licensing inspectors believe bleach is required for cleaning preschool facilities. In fact, it’s only mandated for disinfecting fecal-contaminated areas in infant care centers. For facilities that serve only older children, it’s simply not necessary—and it can be dangerous. “Sodium hypochlorite, or household bleach, breaks down into known cancer-causing chemicals like dioxin and chloramines,” says JunFish.

An over-concentration of bleach is one of the most common mistakes in child care settings, says JunFish. If you do use bleach, a standard-size, 26-fluid-oz. spray bottle of water should contain just two teaspoons of bleach. A gallon of water to wash the floor requires just a quarter cup of bleach to do its job.

##### Clean when kids aren’t there.

Spraying household cleaning supplies when the kids are around might satisfy parents who think it’ll keep their kids from getting sick, but most contain chemicals that are unhealthy, especially for children’s developing bodies. “There’s a lot of overkill in child care centers,” says Donna Green, of the Contra Costa County Child Care Council. “To have cleaning-fluid smells all over your child care setting is not a good thing.” When you are cleaning, spray close to the surface or directly onto your rag so less goes into the air.

##### Use safer cleaners.

A cleaning chemical has to be proven hazardous before it’s removed from the market, but most ingredients in cleaning supplies are untested—no one knows exactly how they affect the human body. Look for cleaners that are biodegradable and non-toxic and don’t contain EDTA or NTA, which are suspected of causing cancer.

Choose safer, simpler alternatives. For example, to clean glass or surfaces, put ¼ cup (or 2 oz.) vinegar, with an optional squirt of lemon juice, into 26-oz. spray bottle with water. You can add ½ teaspoon of vegetable oil if you’re cleaning something really dirty. To wash floors, you can use one or two tablespoons of vegetable soap (available at nat-

ural food stores) and ¼ cup of vinegar in a bucket of water—then rinse with water.

#### Avoid pesticides, both in the yard and inside

Outside, plant native, pest-resistant plants and use non-toxic methods of pest control, like copper wire to keep out snails or hand-pulling (it’s a good activity for the kids) to control weeds. Inside, keep food areas clean and dry to avoid attracting ants and other pests. “Integrated pest management” (IPM) means using non-toxic strategies like these to control pests. More information on IPM is available at [calpirg.org/healthy-schools](http://calpirg.org/healthy-schools).

#### Check out your food

Try to provide foods that are free of preservatives, colorings and additives, less processed and more natural—organic if you can afford it.

#### Put someone in charge

Environmental safety is an ongoing process, so put someone on your staff in charge of learning about safer alternatives. Look at what’s in your cleaning cabinet, at your art supplies, keep an eye on what’s going on around the facility.



Make sure the materials your kids play with don’t contain harmful chemicals.

#### For more information

- Parents for a Safer Environment, 925-283-4609, [www.34.brinkster.com/pfase/](http://www.34.brinkster.com/pfase/)
- Tools for Healthy Schools, [www.toolforhealthyschools.org/](http://www.toolforhealthyschools.org/)
- Healthy Schools Network, [www.healthyschools.org](http://www.healthyschools.org)
- California Healthy Schools, [www.calthehealthyschools.org](http://www.calthehealthyschools.org)
- Child Care Health Program, 510-839-1195, [www.childcarehealth.org](http://www.childcarehealth.org)