

Morris Powder - Articles

October 31, 2007

Cleaning 'Green' At Home' With Schools Reducing Kids' Exposure To Chemical Cleaners, What About At Home?

As local school districts step up "green" cleaning efforts, children are being exposed to fewer potentially harmful chemicals during school hours. But what about the cleaning products used around them the rest of the time?

Some parents, particularly those of young children, are looking into green cleaning at home, realizing that many everyday household cleaners contain potentially toxic petrochemicals and other substances to which children are particularly vulnerable.

"Although the schools are doing what they can to go 'green' to protect kids, parents have to remember that children usually spend eight hours here, and 16 hours at home," Joe Hendrickson, facilities director for the Bellmore Elementary School District, said. "Parents may wish to try the same practices at home."

Common cleaning products are rife with toxins to the point where children's exposure occurs without parents even realizing it. "Ninety percent of all cancers are believed to result from toxins in the environment, and the potential hazards are much closer than most people think," said Deirdre Imus in a recent statement related to a public service announcement, titled "Closer Than You Think." Imus is the founder of the nonprofit Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology.

"The ubiquity of chemicals is taking a toll," concluded David Ewing Duncan in "The Pollution Within," an article in this month's issue of National Geographic magazine. "Many of the compounds absorbed by the body stay there for years-and fears about their health effects are growing." "Unfortunately, environmental hazards are not always obvious." Imus added in her statement. "Yet they're real, and they affect us all-especially children." She stressed that a broader consciousness is needed "to help prevent environmental factors that may cause cancer, autism, asthma and other health problems."

"I am very sympathetic to parents whose children have chronic illnesses," said Kim Rudolfsky of Merrick, a past Levy-Lakeside PTA president. She often wonders how exposure to chemicals in cleaning products affects children, if that could make healthy kids sick and sick ones worse. In view of this, she said, "I think green cleaning makes a lot of sense."

Hazardous Products

Since manufacturers are not required to test cleaning products or their ingredients before putting them on the market, it's up to consumers to try to figure out which cleaning products may be hazardous. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the average household contains anywhere from three to 25 gallons of toxic chemicals. Of those, "a major portion [is] in household cleaning products," the Imus Center reports.

To reduce the amount of these in their homes, parents can begin by eliminating "the most common toxic cleaners found in the household, which are bleach, ammonia and lye," said green cleaning advocate Lynn Tondat Ruggeri, Ph.D., author of "Safer for Your Baby: A Guide to Living Better with Fewer Chemicals." "Lye is an ingredient found in the more caustic oven cleaners," she explained.

Ruggeri said she does not recommend using any of the three for green cleaning, "not only because the fumes are toxic, but also because of exposure to the skin, nose and eyes, and obviously should they be accidentally ingested they are poisonous."

"Some cleaners I use in the kitchen give me a headache," said Jinny Schiffman, a North Bellmore mother of a 6-year-old. She was concerned about what's inside certain cleaners, and said that she'd read that the ingredients in air freshener sprays trigger asthma. "The stuff you're not supposed to be breathing in is what you have in the air fresheners you spray," she remarked, the absurd irony apparent in her baffled expression.

Warnings and Directions

How should parents go about reducing exposure to harmful cleaning chemicals in their homes? "Carefully examine all cleaning products used regularly," recommends Maida P. Galvez, MD, MPH, assistant professor, Department of Pediatrics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Cleaning green at home, however, is not always as simple as reading labels to determine which cleaning products contain toxins. One reason is that the law does not require all ingredients to be listed. Also, if contents are specified, they typically represent a virtual alphabet soup of highly technical terms. Many common disinfectants, including Lysol(r), Formula 409 and Clorox wipes, for example, contain "Alkyl(C12-16)dimethylbenzylammonium chloride." Unless they have biochemistry or toxicology expertise perhaps, few parents would readily understand what that is or what other equally complex chemical compounds found in cleaning products are.

Additionally, even when a substance is less complicated, wading through the flood of environmental and scientific information and conjecture about it can be daunting. A host of public and private health and environment-related organizations, even the EPA itself, have devoted volumes of information to various chemical substances found in cleaners. Just a few examples are sodium hypochlorite (found in bleach), triclosan (an EPA- classified pesticide found in many antibacterial cleansers) and phosphates (found in many dishwasher detergents although banned from laundry products in New York state). Rather than checking the labels for ingredients, it may be more productive to read the other types of information that do have to be printed on them by law, namely safety warnings and directions for use. Cleaners are regulated under the Hazardous Substances Act, with federal regulations mandating that manufacturers identify hazardous products. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission requires warnings on cleaners that are "toxic, carcinogen, corrosive, flammable or combustible, an irritant, or a strong sensitizer."

Add a skull and crossbones, and this is the stuff of warnings and directions on many cleaning product labels found in most homes: "Keep out of reach of children." "Avoid eye or skin contact." "Danger: Corrosive." "Use in well ventilated area." "Harmful if swallowed." "Avoid prolonged breathing of vapors." These are obvious red flags signaling toxicity and one of the few concrete indicators that can help parents decide if, how much, how often, and where to use any given traditional cleaning product.

Two All-Green Choices

Conventional cleaners aside, parents have two basic choices if they want to clean "all green" at home. One is to rely on the judgment of environmentally friendly product manufacturers. The other is to rely on themselves by making their own cleaning concoctions.

There are dozens of "green" or "eco-friendly" product manufacturers today, many that distribute their products online or through mail order catalogs, as well as some brick-and-mortar health-related stores. Manufacturers of green products, however, are often no different from their traditional counterparts in making statements about the effectiveness and safety benefits of their products. It's important, therefore, to read information about the company itself not just about its products as a way of evaluating whether or not making a financial profit plays a role in product claims.

Another idea is to look into product lines that non-profit groups endorse or evaluate at arm's length, having no stake in sales. For example, Grassroots Environmental Education, the non-profit child environmental health advocacy group in Port Washington, recommends a handful of home cleaning suppliers, including SeventhGeneration and Ecover. The international environmental activism organization Greenpeace identifies chemicals and toxins in various brand-name products and assesses their manufacturers for level of environmental conviction. Taking another approach, the Imus Center sells its own green products, including household cleansers, but donates all after-tax profits to the Imus Cattle Ranch for Kids with Cancer in New Mexico.

While endorsing some green products, Grassroots Environmental's Web site says, "The best choice is to make your own cleaners from simple food ingredients such as vinegar, baking soda and lemon juice." Greenpeace suggests using other basic cleaning agents found in grocery or health food stores, such as washing soda (sodium carbonate), baking soda (bicarbonate of soda) and eucalyptus oil.

"Baking soda, vinegar and castile soap are the safest and most effective ways to clean," green cleaning advocate and author Ruggeri said. "Baking soda will clean and neutralize odors. Vinegar is a natural disinfectant; it safely and effectively prevents the growth of bacteria. Castile soap is a safe, effective

cleanser. If you choose castile soap with tea tree oil added, you'll get the natural antiseptic and anti-fungal properties of tea tree as well."

Natural Germ Killers

The biggest question in green cleaning is whether products are effective enough to kill bacteria and other germs. Environmental health advocates even have reservations. "The effectiveness of products at killing germs is paramount, and synthetic microbiocides [bacterial growth inhibitors] are simply more effective than potential replacements of natural origin at this time," the Imus Center reports.

When asked what parents should do to handle serious cleaning situations, such as blood, bathroom substances and raw poultry, Ruggeri said, "Between Bon Ami, baking soda, vinegar, lemon juice and castile soap, you can clean most everything from pans and ovens to countertops, walls and floors." Bon Ami, French for "good friend," is a 120-year-old powdered cleaner made from the mineral feldspar.

"Another option is careful use of hydrogen peroxide," she added. "I would also add that I do not recommend antibacterial agents such as triclosan because of the toxic nature of this chemical and because it can promote the growth of antibiotic resistant bacteria."

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A word from Morris Powder:

As an alternative to many of the products in this article, Morris Powder is an alternative environmentally friendly, non-toxic all purpose cleaner and degreaser. In addition to the many great recommendations providing in the article above we recommend you try Morris Powder.

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