

Creating healthier schools and childcare environments

It's now widely known that children's health is more at risk from exposure to chemicals than adults. It is essential therefore to ensure their environments are as chemical-free as possible. Because children spend a lot of time at school and in childcare, these environments need special attention.

Hazardous chemicals can come from many sources. Areas commonly requiring better management in schools and childcare centres include:

- cleaning products and processes
- pest management
- maintenance (eg painting, renovations)
- building materials
- garden chemicals
- personal care products (eg sunscreen, insect repellents, perfume)
- procurement policy

To get an overall picture of the sources of hazardous chemicals it's useful to carry out a simple chemical hazards audit. The audit will help you to pin point key chemical hazards so you can prioritise your actions for creating a healthier environment.

Four steps to creating healthier schools and childcare environments

- Carry out a Chemical Hazards Audit to identify key areas of concern and priority areas for improvement. Eg Cleaning and pest management are generally areas where improvements can be made.

- Ensure you are meeting all policy, accreditation and legislative responsibilities regarding the purchase, use, storage and disposal of chemical products. Always use chemical products according to label directions and safety information.

- Phase out high-risk chemical products and processes and replace them with safer, eco friendly ones. Set goals and targets for continuous improvement over your planning cycles.

- Develop a Children's Environmental Health Policy. Creating and maintaining a healthy environment is an on-going job. Responsibilities need to be shared and well communicated. Developing a policy helps to focus on the task and can be an excellent communication tool for staff, parents and suppliers.

Resources and Tools:

The U.S. based Children's Health and Environmental Network, is a multi-disciplinary organisation whose mission is to protect the foetus and the child from environmental health hazards and promote a healthy environment. They currently have a Policy Project, to ensure policies to protect children become part of core requirements.

Australian based National Toxics Network has current campaigns in the areas of Chemical Awareness in Schools and Children's Environmental Health which aim to ensure Australia develops and implements policies in line with international initiatives calling for the environmental rights of children to be recognised to better protect them from global chemical hazards.