

Lauren 00:12

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. Today, we sat down with Tracy Gregoire, the coordinator of LDA's Healthy Children Project to discuss purchasing safer back to school supplies.

Lauren 00:37

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Tracy Gregire, the coordinator of LDA's Healthy Children Project. Today we are talking about how to purchase safer school supplies, since school is right around the corner. So Tracy, thank you for being here.

Tracy Gregoire 00:49

Thanks for having me.

Lauren 00:50

So before we dive in, could you explain a little bit about the Healthy Children Project?

Tracy Gregoire 00:55

Yeah, so LDA's Healthy Children Project was established in 2002 to raise awareness around toxic chemicals that harm brain development. Our Healthy Children Project works to prevent exposure to toxic chemicals that are linked to learning, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, and to protect the health of all families from unnecessary toxic chemicals in our products, in our food, and our water and our air.

Lauren 01:25

So relating more back to school supplies, can we assume that all products on shelves are safe products?

Tracy Gregoire 01:32

Unfortunately, no. There are over 80,000 chemicals in commerce today. And sadly, only about 200 have been thoroughly tested for harm, including neurological impacts. Most chemicals were grandfathered in in the 1970s under federal policies. So unfortunately, we cannot at this point, assume products on store shelves are safe. It's also true that it's legal to put a little bit of a chemical into a product, even if it's known to be harmful. So for example, it might be legal to put a little bit of lead in costume jewelry, or in lipstick, or in other things that aren't marketed to children. Just because things are based on how much of a chemical is in a product. But that doesn't take into account all the different exposures. And sadly, that also doesn't take into account pregnant women's exposure, which is the child's exposure.

Lauren 02:32

So even as research has come out that these are harmful chemicals, just because they're grandfathered in, they're still able to be marketed.

Tracy Gregoire 02:39

Right. So it's true that some of these chemicals, like lead, for example, are regulated. But it might be that for lead, or for phthalates, or flame retardant chemicals, all of these chemicals are linked to

neurological harm, so they can harm children's brain health. It may be okay to put a little bit in a product legally. And, of course, that doesn't take into account all of our exposures. If you think about lead, for example, it's not just the costume jewelry, or the makeup that a pregnant mother puts on. But it's also you know, lead can be found, unfortunately, still in old homes because of lead paint, found drinking water. So even though that chemical might be regulated, it's usually regulated in terms of how much of that chemical can be put into one particular product.

Lauren 03:35

Right. So it doesn't take into account that there are many products that may have lead in them.

Tracy Gregoire 03:40

Right, exactly, or by community exposures or how lead interacts with mercury and cadmium, or phthalates, which are all chemicals that can harm children's brains.

Lauren 03:55

So school supplies again, in particular, are there some harmful chemicals that are more common in school supplies, like backpacks, or just typical supplies?

Tracy Gregoire 04:04

I mean, in general, it's hard to say all of the chemicals are concerned, and back to school supplies, because if you pick up a product and look at the packaging, it's not going to list all of the chemicals in it. Sadly, we feel like people have a right to know and that should be easily accessible but it's just unfortunately not. There are certain things like things that are labeled PVC or that have BPA or phthalates or a fragrance that are chemicals of concern. So there are ways to kind of look for products that may be safer and have less of these harmful chemicals in them.

Lauren 04:47

So what should consumers look for when they're looking to purchase safer products?

Tracy Gregoire 04:52

That's a great question. So with back to school supplies because whether kids are going back to school in person or, you know, back to school virtually at home, there's a lot of supplies that families need for their kids. And, you know, of course, we all want to be avoiding those chemicals that are linked to learning disabilities or you know, could potentially harm brain development in our kids. So some things that you can look for sometimes on packaging, they do say, what's not in them, so you can look for PVC free, BPA free, phthalate free, and fragrance free supplies. So for example, when you're looking for generally for school supplies, it's best if possible to avoid purchasing anything with PVC or vinyl in them. And unfortunately, a lot of products have vinyl. And you can sometimes identify these products with a recycling code of a number three on them, or they're labeled as PVC or vinyl. You know, PVC or vinyl can be in school backpacks and shoes, and a lot of different products. Even some of your binders like your glossy binders that have kind of a glossy look to them. There are some safer alternatives. Fortunately, I was in a \$1 store just today, and looking at some of their back to school supplies. And they have like pencil bags or those little bags with the zippers so that they can put pencils, and markers and erasers and that sort of thing. And those pencil holders, they definitely had some that were like see

through or look like they were vinyl or that plastic type. But they also had two different options, different sizes and shapes and colors of canvas bags, you know, things that look more like a canvas or fabric type, which is the kind I bought today. I try to avoid colored paper clips, because they're probably coated with PVC, and stick with a plain metal one. For lunchboxes, you can try a stainless, like for lunch water bottles, you can go with the stainless steel bottles or look for one that say phthalate and BPA free. And for things like markers, you know, looking for ones that say non-toxic and looking for ones that are fragrance free. Phthalates, which are linked to neurological harm are a whole class of chemicals and they're often used in plastics and also as a fragrance in a lot of products.

Lauren 07:50

That's good to know. So you had mentioned that you had found safer alternatives even at the dollar store. So are there about the same amount of safer products? Or would you see that they're harder to find sometimes?

Tracy Gregoire 08:02

Well, the part that makes it hard to find that, again, companies and manufacturers aren't telling us what's in the product. So that's the challenging part. So even some of my friends who are chemists will say I can't shop my way out, it's probably because I don't know what's in the products. And of course parents and guardians shouldn't have to become a scientist to figure out what's safe. So we're working on, you know, pushing companies and also passing policies to ensure more products are safe. But sometimes you can tell by looking for keywords like phthalate free and BPA free, or just looking at, you know, what the product is made out of? Sometimes that'll give you a hint.

Lauren 08:48

I wanted to step back to something you had said. You had mentioned that some harmful chemicals can be linked to learning disabilities. I was wondering if you could expand on what some of these toxic chemicals can do, what effect they would have on the body.

Tracy Gregoire 09:01

Right, so we know, the science is starting to catch up and more and more chemicals are being evaluated and looked at. It's a slow process. But we do know that the National Academy of Sciences states that environmental factors, including chemicals, contribute to about a quarter of these disabilities. And Project Tender, which LDA helped start and is still a part of, is a group of scientists and health advocates and nonprofits like LDA kind of looking at the science and looking at the chemicals that are the classes of chemicals that are most linked to neurological harm. So we know, most people know about heavy metals like lead and mercury and cadmium, like pretty much everybody's heard about lead and that there's no safe level of lead. There are other classes of chemicals like phthalates that are used in a lot of plastics and like I said, often used as a fragrance in a lot of products. If it says fragrance on the label, it's probably a phthalate or some kind of synthetic chemical. There's also flame retardant chemicals that unfortunately don't do very much to slow down fires that are toxic. And even the firefighters are standing with us and saying we need to get these products out, get these classes of chemicals out of products. So they don't do much to prevent or slow down fires, but they are linked to neurological harm and all sorts of cancers. So certain chemicals affect the thyroid and the thyroid is really important, and the functioning of the thyroid is important for brain development. And some just

because of the nature of the chemical, like I said some of these classes of chemical, studies have just found they might lower IQ, contribute to behavior issues, be linked to learning disabilities, some of these chemicals are linked to autism, some of these chemicals like change how children's brains develop, and those changes can have lifelong impacts for the children.

Lauren 11:13

So are there some, I know that you said it's very hard to tell in stores, what a product is made of, do you have any materials that are sort of your go-tos that you know are safe? If a product says that it has this material, you know that you can trust it?

Tracy Gregoire 11:27

Yeah, I mean, sometimes it's things like choosing certain products, or types of products that I feel are safer to reduce exposures, because we can only do so much right? Figure out what's in a product or certain products, there are some great resources, like with personal care products, which is not necessarily a back to school unless you're talking about hand sanitizers or lotion. But those products are, some of those products, Environmental Working Group has a great website where you can look up certain products. And it will tell you some of the ingredients or some of the chemicals that might be of concern or haven't been thoroughly tested. And there are other companies that are doing a better job with really passing or adopting comprehensive policies and really working with a long list of harmful chemicals and getting them out of their products. So sometimes, you know, looking at products through some of these websites, like Environmental Working Group, or going to retailers who are sharing more information about what's in their products, so that you can make a more informed decision.

Lauren 12:52

So back to school is probably going to be looking a lot different for people this year, whether it's remote, or whether people are going back to in-person classes. And that probably means a lot more of cleaning supplies. So are there steps that schools can take to ensure that they have a safe environment that does not have harmful chemicals when they're purchasing cleaning supplies or even just school supplies?

Tracy Gregoire 13:16

Absolutely. So the good news is there's a lot of toolkits on our healthychildrenproject.org website, we have a lot of toolkits and information around cleaning and disinfecting and other resources both for parents and guardians and also for schools. For school districts who are going to be in-person or might be part of the year having kids come in person, you know, cleaning and disinfecting are going to be really critical and very important. Thankfully, we know what we need to do in general to protect our kids and our staff, useful stuff against the virus. So, you know, starting with a really basic stuff, before you even get to cleaning, there's a social distancing, washing your hands for at least 20 seconds has a big impact. Avoiding touching your face, wearing masks, not going to school if somebody's sick. So we know some of this basic stuff that we need to do. It's also true that we need to be doing more thorough cleaning and disinfecting in schools and even at home to protect our families in the home as well. When we're looking at cleaners and disinfectants, it's first important to note that cleaning a surface is the first step, because if you look at the labels on disinfectants, it will say to clean the surface before you use the disinfectant because the disinfectant is going to hopefully get rid of some of those germs but it's not

going to clean the surface, and if those surfaces aren't clean, it's harder to disinfect it, so, you know, sometimes just plain old soap and water, you know can be used to clean surfaces and get the grime off and get the dirt off first so that your disinfectants can work better. When people are looking at disinfectants, there are a number of disinfectants that are just way overkill, even in a public setting, like a school that is more than needed. So for some of these disinfectants, they have what's called quat in them, a quaternary chemical in them. And those are often used in hospitals and settings where there's really resistant bacteria and viruses. And they're like, very heavy duty disinfectants and I would definitely discourage school and parents from using them in any setting because they're really overkill and not needed and can be really harmful and have a whole list of possible health effects to them. And we've got more information on that on our website. The good news is that there are safer disinfectants that are approved by the Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA on there, it's called the N List and as in the letter N that are approved for they're believed to be to do the job in terms of killing the COVID 19 virus. So some of those disinfectants are listed on their website, EPA has a whole list and you can sort the list by active ingredients which is really helpful. So in terms of safer disinfectants the key ingredients that you want to look for is isopropyl alcohol solutions is 70%. Alcohol is really good on hard surfaces, you clean the surface and then you apply the disinfectant with alcohol in it, leave it on for 30 seconds or more and then wipe it off because disinfectants usually should be left on the surface for a period of time. Hydrogen peroxide is another active ingredient that CDC states, household hydrogen peroxide 3% can deactivate the common cold virus, which they've used as a litmus test for COVID-19. And then other products with active ingredients like thymol lactic acid and even citric acid are on the EPA approved list for Coronavirus. So it's looking at those safer disinfectants, those key ingredients, and looking for the safer alternatives that are going to still do the job, protect our children and our staff at school or protect our families at home, but not have really overkill chemicals that can have a lot of health effects.

Lauren 18:10

That's really good to know, I feel like for a lot of people that might not be on the forefront of their minds. So that's really helpful to know.

Tracy Gregoire 18:17

Right, and Women's Voices for the Earth is one of the links we have on our website. And they've got a whole toolkit that's geared towards parents, for parents to share and have that conversation with schools about what they're using, and even has like a draft letter for as a parent, here's what I'm concerned about in terms of cleaning and disinfecting supplies in here. So safer alternatives. And I think the good news is that there are a lot of organizations like Healthy Schools Network and LDA, and Women's Voices for the Earth and a bunch of others who are doing this work, kind of educating schools about this, but having a parent, which I've done with my school district, reach out to somebody in the school or even in the superintendent's office, and ask them about what kind of cleaning supplies they use and what kind of products they use and share some of this information can help schools make that switch if they're not already using some of the safer options. And we also definitely discourage schools from using like Clorox wipes that have the quats and that are really strong and again, overkill in a lot of situations. And some of these products, obviously, you should never have kids using those kinds of disinfecting wipes on anything that needs to be a trained professional at school who's doing that cleaning, preferably when the kids are not in the room.

Lauren 19:46

You've given us a lot of great resources. If anybody wants to learn more about the Healthy Children Project or get more news or updates about safer products, where could they go?

Tracy Gregoire 19:55

So our Healthy Children Project Program website is healthychildrenproject.org. We also have a Facebook page. You can search for it at Healthy Children Project. And on Twitter we're LDA Healthy Child. So all of those resources are updated on a regular basis. We have a whole school and Coronavirus page, a mental health kind of Coronavirus page, and a lot of different pages about the work that we're doing and how people can get involved. And people often ask me as a mom, you know, they thanked me for the work that I do. And I tell them that we really need people to join LDA and work with us on this issue. Because when parents, and just any individual, starts pushing companies to sell safer products, it really does make a difference when you go into stores and ask them, you know, is this phthalate free? I can't tell, or how do you know this product is safe? Or what is your company doing to get some of the worst chemicals out of the products? We've seen great, great change happening. So LDA does policy work at the state and federal level. But we also push and partner with major companies to adopt chemical policies, share resources on how they can ensure their products are safer, and really go above and beyond state and federal guidelines, which sadly are not as health protective as they need to be to really push companies and manufacturers to kind of take their own steps to ensure products are safer for all families.

Lauren 21:45

Great, thank you so much for talking with us about this. Again, a very relevant topic, school is right around the corner. Thank you so much.

Tracy Gregoire 21:53

Yeah, thank you.

Lauren 22:05

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is a little idea by Scott Holmes. This series was made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. For more information from LDA visit ldaamerica.org.