

**Lauren** 00:11

Thank you for joining us for another episode of the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. Today, we talk to Tracy Gregoire, the coordinator of LDA's Healthy Children Project, an organization seeking to prevent or eliminate the preventable causes of learning and developmental disabilities. In this episode, we learn about the danger of exposure to toxic chemicals, different resources for finding safe products, and how to advocate for safer materials and products.

**Kristina Scott** 00:45

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Tracy Gregoire, the coordinator of Learning Disability Association's Healthy Children's Project. Thank you for joining me, Tracy.

**Tracy Gregoire** 00:53

Yeah, thanks for having me.

**Kristina Scott** 00:55

What is Healthy Children Projects mission?

**Tracy Gregoire** 00:58

So Healthy Children Project is working to prevent or eliminate the preventable causes of learning and developmental disabilities. So we know that genes obviously play an important role. And there are other factors. But we also know that the National Academy of Sciences reports that at least a quarter of these disabilities are linked to toxic chemical exposures or other environmental factors. So if you think of a light switch, genetics may play a role in a lot of these disabilities, but what may flick on the light for some people may be toxic chemical exposures.

**Kristina Scott** 01:37

Oh, so there's certain chemicals? Or are there certain products that I should be looking for or preventing my child from using?

**Tracy Gregoire** 01:46

Right, so the trick is that there's over 85,000 chemicals, we're not exactly sure how many of those are actually in use. But we do know that certain classes of chemicals and certain chemicals, because of research showed neurological harm. So you might have heard of some chemicals like phthalates that have been in the news the past couple of years. Phthalates are used in a lot of plastics, and they're also used a lot for fragrances and products. So if a product says fragrance on it, it very likely could be a whole host of phthalate chemicals. Unfortunately, because of the lack of disclosure laws, they can put fragrance and not actually put the chemical being used, whereas interesting enough, if it's like a natural fragrance, like an essential oil, they would put it on the product label. So phthalates are a whole class of chemicals. Some of the phthalates have been shown to be linked to learning disabilities. But as a class, there's big red concern signs for that class. So much, though, that Project Tender, which was started by Learning Disabilities Association of America, and we're still a part of, is a group of 60 leading scientists and some nonprofit organizations who are looking at the science around chemicals linked to neurological harm. And they've left the class of phthalates as a concern, because of research showing

that they're linked to everything from attention issues, to behavior issues, to lower IQ. And sometimes the sad part is, by the time the science is caught up, we know that there's a problem. So we're trying to attack this as classes as well. So with a class, you know, some phthalates show it, kind of working on policies to get phthalates in general out of products, because if you have a class of chemicals they tend to often work very similarly in terms of health issues.

**Kristina Scott** 03:51

So you know, exposure to these chemicals, is there a period in one person's life where exposure is more detrimental than others?

**Tracy Gregoire** 03:59

Right, so we know that when the child is in the womb, a fetus, is obviously a very critical time because of development. We also know the early years for children are a critical time because infants and toddlers and young children, they're crawling around on the floor, they drink and eat more by body weight than adults do. And just because of their mannerisms, like you know, picking up things, putting them in their mouth, crawling around, there's higher exposures. We also know that unfortunately, the mother's exposure is the child's exposure. So children are actually born pre-polluted, so they can have hundreds of chemicals already in their body because it's passed from the mother to the child. So really, we need to be looking at this for everybody because we know that even young women, before they have children, are being exposed to chemicals, and even men we found when men have been exposed in the workplace we can actually trace some of the possible effects of certain chemicals in their child. So even if they're exposed earlier on in life, there can be issues with, you know, impacting their child later on. We also know that the brain is developing into the 20s, which we didn't know for a long time. So we really approach this as protecting everybody. But we often talk about young children and pregnant women, because we know that young child exposure is the worst.

**Kristina Scott** 05:34

So you don't want to live in a bubble. So what are some things we can do or we can watch out for I know, you talked about the phthalates, I'm probably gonna say it wrong, chemical, but other things that we should be doing to really protect ourselves and to protect our kids.

**Tracy Gregoire** 05:51

Right, so there are certain classes and chemicals, people have known about the heavy metals for a long time. So your lead and your mercury, your cadmium, arsenic, are unfortunately, a little bit of even some of those chemicals can be added to products. So if you're buying products, like if you're buying children's jewelry, like going to the dollar store and buying the cheap costume jewelry, because it's not marketed to children, they can put in more lead to those things. So being cautious about what you're buying for your kids and where you're buying it. But the truth is, like a lot of these chemicals are in products in general, whether you're going to the big box stores or sometimes even other stores. So looking at certain chemicals, I think, you know, phthalates, heavy metals. There's a new class of chemicals that it's been around since the 1950s called PFAS chemicals that are also found in a lot of products. And that's a whole class of about 5,000 chemicals. But some of these chemicals we know generally where they're used, so phthalates are used a lot in plastics and those fragrances. So if you're buying plastics, look for BPA free and phthalate free, which is much easier to find now, which is really

good. If you're a big exposure that we know for some of these chemicals like PFAS, and even some of the heavy metals, and the phthalates is food packaging and food. They're not necessarily intentionally added to the food but because of the packaging they're in or because of the process that the food has gone through they can be in food. So for phthalates, LDA is part of coalitions with other groups and there's going to be some testing coming out in the next few months of testing even fast food containers for phthalates and PFAS chemicals. So some of your wrappers, PFAS are used for their degreasers. So to prevent grease, water and stains in products, but they're also used for food to kind of keep the grease off whatever they're putting the food into for you to bring home and take out of the fast food places. So we're trying to shine a light on the problem of where some of those chemicals are found and then tell people and also companies what the safer alternatives are because there are alternatives to wrapping burgers and containers that often have the lining that you can't see in them for that takeout food, like shining a light on it and then talking to those companies and saying like PFAS chemicals and phthalates are harmful to health and LDA will say they're linked to neurological harm or possible neurological harm. There are safer alternatives out there, you need to use them. So whenever we do testing with partners and find results, we share that on the website like the LDA of America website and the Healthy Children Project website. Also on the Healthy Children Project Facebook page and say, 'Here's recent testing showing where some of these chemicals are. Here's some safer alternatives. And you can join us by telling the companies that you want a safer alternative used.' And the good news with what we call market pressure is that companies will often react when there's public pressure much more quickly than we can get policies passed at the state or federal level.

**Tracy Gregoire 09:35**

So that's a little bit about the PFAS chemicals. We found heavy metals in baby and infant food which obviously is a big concern. So Healthy Babies Bright Future had LDA of America and some state LDA affiliates and other partners across the United States go in to get baby foods. I went into my local store in Maine and bought a bunch of baby food and toddler food. So you know your carrots on your peas and your baby cereals and even like juices marketed to young babies and some formula and tested the food or the packaging for heavy metals, so the lead, mercury, arsenic and cadmium. And what we found, and what other testing has shown, is that arsenic is often in rice, because the arsenic is in the soil. So the arsenic is in the soil both because arsenic is naturally occurring, but also because pesticides used decades ago had arsenic in it, and the arsenic just stays there. So it's, and you know, certain areas of the United States had more arsenic than others. But with rice cereal, the easy thing that new parents can do with infants is not feed their babies rice cereal, which is kind of counterintuitive, because pediatricians and everybody said like rice cereal is a great starter cereal, so either avoiding rice cereal altogether, or using mixes, so using oatmeal with rice or mixes of cereals, but now there's oatmeal, and there's quinoa, and there's all these different alternatives, but the rice had the highest amount. And interesting enough that rice puffs, which are also very popular, had the highest amount of arsenic in them. And we also found some of the other baby food with lead, mercury, and cadmium, which are also neurotoxins. So we've got a little fact sheet on our website. And we can share that with folks, kind of talking about different things they can do. If you eat rice at home, which I do, before you cook the rice, you can rinse it in a lot of water to kind of get out some of the chemicals. And that has been shown to be helpful. Because rice obviously is healthy in a lot of ways. I think now that some of the companies know about this issue, hopefully they're going to do more soil testing as well over time. But we're also approaching the Food and Drug Administration and saying you need to set protective

limits on these heavy metals in infant and toddler and other foods. And we've been asking for a couple of years. And we're still fighting for that because there needs to be not just a limit, but a health protective limit for children especially. And we give some other tips like Consumer Reports tested different juices, and some of them are higher in arsenic or some of the heavy metals than others. So whenever there are resources, we share those directly with people and say, here's what you can do. The best thing to do is always eat fresh fruits and vegetables. That's always the number one. We also know we live busy lives, a lot of people can't afford to get fresh fruits and vegetables all the time. So when you're getting your conventional vegetables that have pesticides in them, washing them first whenever possible. And we share resources like Environmental Working Group that has a clean and dirty dozen every year. They print the fruits and vegetables that had the most pesticides in them and then the ones that had the least pesticides in them. And because we import a lot and there's changes in laws, those tend to change year to year. So that's a great resource for people, so in 2019 which was the last list they had for their dirty dozen, the ones if you can afford to buy organic you should, including like strawberries, apples, peaches, pears, tomatoes, spinach, nectarines, celery, even potatoes and hot peppers and grapes are some of the Dirty Dozen. Sometimes even having pesticides that are illegal in the United States but that we're importing unfortunately. And the clean dozen, so the ones that you don't have to be as worried about buying organic are like avocados, sweet corn, pineapple, peas that are frozen, papayas, eggplants, asparagus, honeydew melon. So they give you some advice, so whenever our partner organizations are sharing resources we share them with our folks as well because we know that people want to protect their families now and not just wait for us to pass policies or to get companies to get these chemicals out.

**Kristina Scott 14:41**

So if someone was looking for, you noted that there was a lot of product testing whether it be in baby foods or whether it be in jewelry from certain department stores or dollar stores, etc, where would everyone go to get information as to what's tested and what the testing results were?

**Tracy Gregoire 15:02**

So when we're a part of testing, or our partners do testing, we've posted to the [healthychildrenproject.org](http://healthychildrenproject.org) and also our Facebook posts, and there's like, seems to be new testing monthly on different products. And sometimes there are manufacturers based, so if we're testing certain jewelry, it could be in the dollar stores, but also obviously in a bunch of the big box and other stores as well. So we post those things. Environmental Working Group has this great skin deep database where you can look up different personal care products, so your shampoos and your lotions, things that you tend to lather and put on your body or skin, they've got great resources. So on the [healthychildrenproject.org](http://healthychildrenproject.org), we have resources pages, and then we share, like different partners who are doing testing or are looking at labels for what chemicals are in products and then making recommendations. Like you know which sunscreens to use, or the good guide has a great app where you can look at both chemicals but also social responsibility and different factors for companies. So a lot of groups are doing more of the, 'here's what you can do,' now, here's some of the testing or just looking at the labels when they are required to disclose and kind of giving advice on which products are safer. And of course, the long term is passing state and federal policies and moving the market by working with companies to get them to tell their suppliers 'Here's the worst of the worst chemicals, you need to get them out. And you need to replace them with proven safer alternatives, not just another

chemical that we're not sure about, or acts very similar in the same class.' We call it the whack a mole game, which is like you hit down BPA, and then BPS pops up, which is in the same class and very similar and acts similar in the body. So we're working really hard to make sure we're not just replacing with chemicals that are also of concern.

**Kristina Scott** 17:06

So thank you for sharing what we can kind of do for our families in the now and what's hopefully coming in terms of legislation and policy. How are we, as a final thought, how do we as citizens move that policy forward? Maybe quicker.

**Tracy Gregoire** 17:21

Right, so joining the LDA listserv, we share actions, both for policy and market pressure work with our members and with our general list. So every year we're working, looking at policies throughout the states, for example, chlorpyrifos, which is a really nasty pesticide, was banned for household use decades ago. And the EPA said it should be banned but didn't ban it. So some of the states started working on a chlorpyrifos ban. So Hawaii was the first and then I worked with people on the ground in New York State. New York State was the second late last year to ban it. And there are other states like California that banned it. And actually you can't even sell it now as of this month, sell it in California. And so I work with people, like I said on the ground like Maryland. The president of LDA of Maryland, Jamie, went to a hearing last week, and was in front of the Senate committee explaining why LDA cares about this. And I can provide information for people to call their legislators and it's usually very simple. Like if I was doing it, as an individual and not as LDA, I would say, 'Hi, my name is Tracy, I'm a mom, I have a 10 year old with autism and anxiety and ADHD. There are pesticides like chlorpyrifos that have really strong links to neurological harm. And I need you to help me protect my family by banning this pesticide.' So it's sharing personal stories with decision makers that really makes a big difference. And the good news is because of several states banning it, even just a couple of states, one of the major makers of chlorpyrifos which is Cortiva, which was a spinoff from DuPont Dow just announced that at the end of this year, they're going to stop making that pesticide. And they're not the only, but one of the major manufacturers of chlorpyrifos. So either by doing, you know a couple of states banning the chemical, they're like, Okay, in the United States, we can no longer sell this chemical. We're going to use a safer one that we're already selling in other countries or other places like Europe and when we're doing market pressure work and do some testing, like the fast food testing that'll come out soon. We need help going to those companies and telling McDonald's and Panera and whoever might have some of these chemicals in the food packaging. 'Hey, like I'm concerned about this. I want to continue to be your customer, I come here regularly, I need you to replace that with a safer alternative so I feel good about buying your food and giving it to my family.

**Kristina Scott** 20:10

Those are some great scripts that we could use both for legislators and both for companies. So I thank you for your time, Tracy, and we look forward to looking at all the resources and especially that market data that's coming out pretty soon and all the fast food I think that will be really interesting and we can actually go to action on getting legislation passed as well as meeting with companies and demanding change because we want healthy children and we want to be healthy individuals ourselves. So thank you for your time.

**Tracy Gregoire** 20:39

Yeah, thank you.

**Lauren** 20:40

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. This series is made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes on our next episode of the LDA podcast, we talked to Chris Zeigler Dendy and Dr. Ruth Hughes about how to support a child with ADHD or LD who is transitioning into adulthood. If you'd like more information from the healthy children project, visit [healthy children project.org](http://healthychildrenproject.org). For more resources from Ida, visit [Idaamerica.org](http://Idaamerica.org)