

Green cleaning

Many carers and educators find it difficult to make informed decisions about cleaning products. Bridget Gardner, director of Fresh Green Clean, provides advice on selecting methods that are both safe and effective.



Fresh Green Clean runs workshops in early childhood services which primarily focus on improving cleaning practices. However, the questions that most participants ask are 'which brands are safe?' and 'do green cleaners really work?' Unfortunately, there is no easy way to separate marketing spin from facts.

HOW SAFE IS SAFE?

There are currently two methods of assessing the safety of a cleaning product:

1. Label warnings like 'Caution', 'Keep out of reach of children', 'Poison' and 'Dangerous poison' mean that a product contains scheduled poisons.
2. Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are provided by manufacturers and list health effects and first aid information. All children's services must keep an MSDS onsite for every product they use.

The problem is that these warnings are based on toxicity tests that must prove a certain compound causes disease and, as Canadian toxicologist Dr. Herbert Needleman said in 1997, 'Toxicity testing has not even begun to keep pace with disease. We are conducting a vast experiment on our children which will affect generations to come.'

CLEANING TIPS

It's not difficult to find ways to clean that are both safe and effective:

- Warm soapy water can remove dirt and bacteria from most surfaces. Mix a little readily biodegradable and pH neutral detergent or pure liquid soap into warm water.
- Basic products such as bicarbonate of soda and vinegar are very effective cleaners.
- Window and surface sprays can contain toxic solvents in order to quickly evaporate. Instead of using these products, wash surfaces with basic agents then remove moisture with squeegees, microfibre glass cloths or flannelette rags.
- Always make sure bathrooms are well ventilated and use essential oil sprays instead of air-fresheners, which often contain highly toxic compounds.

In a nutshell, all effective cleaning requires is clean hands, water, tools and a little elbow grease!

SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE CLEANING

In order to address the confusion about cleaning products, Fresh Green Clean has received funding from the Victorian Government's Sustainability Fund, managed by Sustainability Victoria. This funding will be used to develop the Safe and Sustainable Indoor (SASI) Cleaning project for early childhood services. The project will be piloted this year in partnership with the City of Yarra, in three Yarra Council childcare centres and The Lady Gowrie Child Centre.

Three Swinburne University faculties are assisting the SASI Cleaning project:

1. The National Centre of Sustainability is developing criteria to assess the safety and sustainability of cleaning products which will require manufacturers to provide proof that their product is safe.
2. The Faculty of Life and Social Sciences is challenging the belief that green cleaning is not effective by testing selected methods in two early childhood centres.
3. The Faculty of Design is taking a user-centred approach to represent the results of the pilot project, to ensure that the concerns and requirements of management, staff and parents are addressed.

The project intends to deliver a website with a simple guide to safer cleaner purchasing, to be launched mid-year, and the SASI Cleaning certified program which will be extended to other early childhood services in Victoria by 2008 and, nationally, by 2009.

Bridget Gardner

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To contact Bridget or find out more about the SASI Cleaning project, email bridget@freshgreenclean.com.au or visit www.freshgreenclean.com.au.

Reference and further reading

Needleman, H. (1997). Quoted by P. Landrigan at the Toxics Release Inventory and Right-to Know Conference, Washington, D.C.

For more information, read the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Staying healthy in childcare document* (www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/ch43syn.htm) and the *Department of Health and Aging Infection Control Guidelines* (www.icg.health.gov.au).