

ECEnet Special Report



Eco-Healthy Child-Care Programs



**LEA Early Childhood Educators
Network
Special Report by
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It's easy being green!

Many of you may have grown up with Kermit the Frog and recall him singing... "It's **not easy** being **green!**" In today's world, it **is** easy being **green** and children today are learning that not only **is** it easy being **green**, but it has also become very important. It is necessary for us to model to our children and grandchildren, as well as our students and their families caring for this precious and fragile world that God created.

As early childhood educators, the story of creation is one of our favorite Bible stories to share with young children. The first five words of the Bible are... "In the beginning, God created..." (Genesis 1:1). Young children especially love the repetition of God's words throughout the story of creation, such as ...

- "And God said..."
- "And it was so..."
- "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1-3).
- "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Parents have many choices: They can choose to:

- keep their young children at home with them
- leave them in the care and nurture of family, friends, or neighbors
- hire a nanny
- take them to a family child-care provider
- enroll them in a parent co-op
- take them to nursery school or a full-day childcare
- register them at a for-profit center or one that is owned and operated by their corporation
- take them to a non-profit agency **or** enroll them in your Lutheran early learning center

Today's economy affects our families and programs. Pastors, principals, early childhood administrators, and the decision makers within our congregations must honestly evaluate our Lutheran education programs.

- Why do parents choose to send their children to our program **or** why do they choose the program down the street?

- What makes our program special and unique?
- What are the needs of our community, and how well are we meeting those needs? Are there needs that are not currently being met, and how can we as a church and school body meet those needs?

Many parents are now *going green*. They choose to drive hybrid cars, take advantage of mass transit, carpool to work, work flexible schedules to reduce the amount of time they are driving to and from work, select work environments that are *green*, and choose *green*-built homes, apartments, and condominiums. So, why would they **not** seek an early learning program that is also *eco-healthy*?

Research shows that the first years of children's lives are critical in shaping their health and development. By increasing your awareness of *eco-healthy child care*, you will provide a healthier, safer, and more environmentally friendly program, as well as being more proactive in preventing certain illnesses, diseases, and even disabilities that are linked to specific chemicals.

The Oregon Environmental Council has developed an "**Eco-Healthy Child Care Program**" designed to assist childcare providers in creating and maintaining environments that are healthy, safe, and *green* for young children. Going through this self-evaluation process will immediately benefit the health and well-being of the children in your care as well as the staff. Oregon residency is not a requirement of this program.

The Oregon Environmental Council (OEC) provides free training, marketing, and a special endorsement for qualifying childcare providers. This is a national program created by the OEC to ensure that child-care settings are healthy, safe, and *green* by reducing children's exposure to toxins.

Once a child-care setting receives its endorsement, it will be listed on the Eco-Healthy Child Care Web site—which is FREE advertizing. Qualifying programs may potentially receive additional media publicity.

Are there any Eco-Healthy child-care centers in your area? To find out, visit <http://www.oconline.org>, connect to the "Join the Healthy Kids Campaign," link to the "Eco-Healthy Child Care" site, and scroll down to the "request for a check-list or tips on how to go eco-healthy" and search for endorsements of programs in your area. Why not become one of the first early learning programs in your area to go *green*?

Here are some reasons why you might want to prayerfully consider going *green*, based upon concerns pertaining to our children's health and well-being.

Pesticides

Children may be exposed to pesticides by playing on the floor, lawn, and play areas and by eating foods that have been treated with pesticides or by handling pets. Acute exposure can cause breathing problems, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, and loss of concentration. Long-term exposure can lead to asthma, cancer, reproductive harm, birth defects, and neurobehavioral problems.

Air Quality

Indoor air pollution is often two- to five-times greater than outdoor levels, due to lack of adequate air filtration and ventilation. The presence of dirt, moisture, and warmth encourages the growth of mold and other contaminants that can trigger asthma and other allergic reactions.

Solutions include:

- Not smoking on the premises.
- Not idling vehicles while dropping off and picking up children.
- Preventing mold and mildew by fixing leaks and opening windows and using fans.
- Cleaning spills immediately.
- Not using scented candles or artificial air fresheners.
- Using biodegradable and least-toxic cleaning products (www.greenseal.org or www.ecologo.org).
- Using non-toxic art supplies (www.acminet.org).
- Removing classroom pets with fur or feathers.

Household Chemicals

Try these alternatives:

Window Cleaner:

- ¼ cup white vinegar
- ½ teaspoon liquid soap or detergent
- 2 cups water

Mold and Mildew Cleaner:

- Mix equal parts vinegar and water
- Spray and wipe clean

Lead

Lead is a naturally occurring heavy metal found in the environment and is used in the production of certain batteries, PVC piping, and art supplies. Despite the ban on lead in house paint, gasoline, and ceramics, lead may still be found in play jewelry, art supplies, PVC toys, and paint.

Lead accumulates in the blood, bones, muscles, and fat. Children exposed to lead can experience growth delays, behavioral and learning problems, and damage to their brains and nervous systems. The people at highest risk

are pregnant women and young children. Young children's bodies absorb more lead as they are growing; their brains and nervous systems are still developing, and they put everything in their mouths. Soil often is contaminated with lead due to exhaust from lead contaminated gasoline settling on the ground before 1978. Many children's toys and vinyl products contain high levels of lead (www.healthytoys.org/home.php).

Mercury

Mercury is a naturally occurring heavy metal that is released into the environment by human activity such as coal burning power plants, the improper disposal of mercury containing items such as batteries, fluorescent light bulbs, and mercury thermometers. (www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/con-prod.htm).

Mercury can damage the brain and nervous system. Young children are more sensitive to the effects of mercury than adults.

Recommendations include that children under six and pregnant women not eat more than two 6-ounce servings of shark, tuna, and swordfish each week; use digital thermometers; and recycle batteries and fluorescent light bulbs.

Furniture and Carpets

Formaldehyde and toxic flame retardants are the two toxins of most concern when it comes to home/school furnishings.

- Avoid wall to wall carpet.
- Limit use of pressed wood products that are made with adhesives that contain urea-formaldehyde resins (UF).
- Do not leave foam exposed in stuffed animals, cushions, and pillows.
- Keep dust levels low.
- Vacuum often.
- Ventilate while cleaning.
- Remove shoes before entering the classrooms, especially those designated for infants, waddlers, and toddlers.
- Choose floor coverings made with natural fibers, which are naturally fire resistant.
- Choose meat, fish, and dairy low in fat, since toxic flame retardants accumulate in animal fat.

Art Supplies

Some materials contain toxic chemicals while others produce toxic fumes. Read labels. Identify precautions. Ventilate your art area by opening windows, use fans, or take your art activities outdoors. Wash hands before and after using art materials.

Helpful Web sites include the following:

- www.acminet.org

- www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/pdfs/kit/checklists/teacherchklistbkqd.pdf
- www.oeha.ca.gov/education/art/artguide/html
- www.checnet.org/healthhouse/education/articles-detail.asp?Main_ID=137

Earth-friendly modeling clay:

One cup flour (not self-rising)

½ cup salt

One cup water

One tablespoon vegetable oil

1 ½ teaspoons cream of tartar

Mix in saucepan over low heat. Dough is ready when it rolls into a ball. Store the dough in an air tight container such as a large, sealable plastic bag.

Plastics and Plastic Toys

Since children's immune systems and organs are still developing, they are especially vulnerable to the toxins that may be found in their plastic toys, bottles, and sippy cups. Babies and toddlers place everything in their mouths which increases their exposure. Phthalates and Bisphenol-A (BPA) are the two toxins of most concern as research increasingly shows these chemicals to mimic hormones and to disrupt a child's normal growth and development. The phthalates are used to soften PVC containing vinyl plastics, bind fragrances in products, and act as solvents and fixatives. Bisphenol-A is used in making hard, clear plastics.

Precautions include:

- Check the recycling number on the plastics and avoid #3, #6, and #7.
- Do not reheat food in carry-out containers.
- Use PVC-free plastic wrap.
- Choose PVC-free toys.
- Never warm baby bottles in the microwave.

Treated Playground Equipment

Treated wood found in some playground equipment, benches, picnic tables, and decks may contain potentially hazardous levels of arsenic due to the use of Chromated Copper Arsenate (CCA) as a preservative. CCA was phased out in 2004 but may have been used prior to that date in some centers.

Suggestions...

- Apply a water-based sealant twice a year.
- Wash hands after contact and keep hands out of mouths while sitting on benches, at picnic tables, and while climbing on equipment.
- Cover picnic tables with a tablecloth and avoid placing food and drinks directly on the wood surface.
- Do not burn, sand, or cut wood that has been treated with CCA.

Recycling and Garbage Storage

Americans generate garbage at a rate of four pounds per day per person! Recycling conserves natural resources, lessens habitat destruction, saves energy, prevents emissions of greenhouse gasses and other pollutants, leads to cleaner air and cleaner water, and reduces the need for landfills and incinerators.

Keep garbage areas clean and covered. Not only has God created a wonderful world for us to use and enjoy, but He has also called us to be good stewards of its vast richness and resources, respecting it and preserving it for future generations.

Think of all the many things we use every day as consumers. Invite your staff, parents, and congregational members to save "things" for you- how can you "reuse" them in your creative art center, dramatic play area, block corner, for science and math activities, literacy, storage? Be creative!

Here are some thoughts for reusing newspapers:

- Use them to protect your tables during messy art or sensory activities.
- With older children, go on a letter or word search.
- Roll flat newspapers into cones. Roll others into balls. Play catch with a friend.
- On a windy day, take newspapers outdoors. How high and far can they sail? Do flat sheets go higher and farther than newspaper balls?
- How many times can you fold a sheet of newspaper? Who folded his the smallest?
- How many times can you fold a sheet of newspaper and still be able to tear it in half?
- Fold hats
- Make *papier mache*: ½ cup flour, 2 cups cold water, 2 cups boiling water, 3 tablespoons sugar. Mix together the flour and the water in a bowl. Add this mixture to the boiling water and allow it to return to a boil. Remove from heat and add the sugar. As the mixture cools, it will thicken. (Please be aware that flour paste will become moldy over time.)
- To make your shape, tear numerous strips of newspapers. Dip them in the paste mixture, running them through your fingers to squeeze out excess paste. Drape the strips over your mold. Overlap the strips as you go. You may need more than one layer. It is best to allow one layer to dry before adding another. You can use blown up balloons, cans, bottles, milk cartons and many other recycled/reused materials as your mold. Paint and decorate your creations with other reused materials such as fabric, ribbon, and lace.

So... are YOU ready to explore eco-healthy child care?

To receive your endorsement from the Oregon Environmental Council...

1. Visit their website at www.oeconline.org/ehcc and print a copy of their **Eco-Healthy Child Care Endorsement Checklist**.
2. Answer all 25 questions on the checklist. You must comply with 20 out of 25 items, including two items that are required.
3. Invite another person who is not an employee of your church or school to also complete the checklist. This individual could be a member of your school board or a parent in your program.
4. Complete the form and submit it to the Oregon Environmental Council for approval.

Be one of the first Lutheran Early Childhood Centers to become Eco-Healthy! Be one of the first early childhood programs in your community to go **green!**

What a great way to be special and unique! What a wonderful reason for becoming a school of choice! What a perfect way to meet the growing and changing needs of the community you serve! What a powerful message to send to children and families in your community that you treasure the world God created for you.

"And God saw everything that He had made and behold, it was very good." Genesis 1: 31

It is easy being green!

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