

GREEN CLEANING

What is “green cleaning”?

Green cleaning describes the growing trend of using cleaning products and methods that are safer for human health and the environment. By using products with less toxic ingredients, early care and education (ECE) programs can protect the health of children and staff and protect the environment. Environmentally friendly cleaning is accomplished by establishing policies and procedures and providing staff training in safe and effective cleaning practices.

Green cleaning improves indoor air quality and is often less expensive. The goal of green cleaning in ECE programs is to create environments that support healthy growth and learning for children and show a commitment to a healthy work environment for staff.

The key goals of green cleaning are to:

- ▶ keep the environment clean to protect children and staff from germs and triggers of illnesses such as asthma and allergies.
- ▶ protect children and staff from unnecessary exposure to chemicals in cleaning products that may cause harmful health effects.

To accomplish these goals, choose cleaning products and develop policies carefully and provide training for classroom, kitchen and custodial staff. In the past, the main priority for cleaning and sanitizing in ECE environments has been protecting children from the spread of infectious disease. But recent research suggests that the chemicals used to clean or kill germs may have harmful health effects. There are safer ways to protect children from the spread of infectious disease. For example, teaching children to wash their hands and making handwashing a routine practice in ECE is an effective policy for preventing the spread of germs that make children sick.

Regular cleaning is important

The everyday, routine cleaning activities of sweeping, wiping, vacuuming and scrubbing remove dirt, oils and moisture that germs need to thrive. When there is less buildup of dirt and germs, there is less need for strong chemicals to clean and sanitize.

- ▶ Regular cleaning keeps dust, pollen, pesticides and other particles out of the indoor environment and improves indoor air quality.
- ▶ Sanitizers are more effective at killing germs when the surface is clean.

Please note that green cleaning alone does not disinfect or sanitize surfaces. See CCHP’s Health and Safety Note, *Sanitizing Safely and Effectively in ECE* for more information on sanitizers and disinfectants.

STEPS TO KEEP YOUR CHILD CARE ENVIRONMENT CLEAN

- ▶ **Choose the right equipment and clean regularly** to reduce the need for chemicals to clean, sanitize and disinfect.
- ▶ **Use a vacuum cleaner with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.** HEPA filtration vacuum cleaners trap mold spores, dust, dust mites, pet dander and other irritating allergens from surfaces.
- ▶ **Use microfiber mops and cloths.** Microfiber mops and cloths are made from a strong, lint-free synthetic fiber that is very absorbent. Dust, dirt and germs are attracted to and held tightly by the microfiber, so they are not spread from one area to another. Microfiber mop heads and cleaning cloths hold sufficient water for cleaning, yet don’t drip, and so less cleaning product is needed. Microfiber mops are also lighter and easier to use than conventional mops.
- ▶ **Place floor mats at building entryways.** Teach children to clean their feet when entering the building. This may capture 80% of soil entering indoor areas and reduces the amount of soil that must be cleaned.
- ▶ **Consider a policy that encourages people to remove their shoes when they come indoors.** Ask staff and families to provide a pair of “indoor” shoes or slippers.
- ▶ **Decrease clutter to make cleaning easier.** Store equipment and supplies in plastic boxes with tight-fitting lids.

[Steps to keep your child care environment clean continued]

- ▶ **Repair hard surfaces** that have cracks, pits or chips to reduce the buildup of dirt and germs.
- ▶ **Encourage frequent handwashing using gentle soap and running water.** Handwashing may play a larger role in preventing the spread of infectious illnesses than sanitizing and disinfecting.
- ▶ **Choose cleaning products that are less toxic.** This includes floor-care products used to maintain floor finishes since they are some of the most toxic products used in building maintenance.
- ▶ **Open windows and change filters in your heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems to increase air circulation and improve indoor air quality.** Many illnesses are spread by breathing in germs that linger in the air, rather than by contact with germs on surfaces, so be sure to provide good ventilation in your program. Check with your building manager to make sure the heating and ventilations systems are maintained.

Choosing cleaning products that are safer for people and the environment

Many cleaning products contain toxic chemicals. Children are easily exposed to the chemicals in cleaning products because they:

- ▶ breathe in the chemicals that get into the air when these products are used;
- ▶ absorb chemicals through their skin when they touch surfaces that have chemical residues;
- ▶ mouth objects (for example, toys) and surfaces and swallow chemicals that are on those objects and surfaces.

Many consumers mistakenly believe that if the word “green” appears in the name of a cleaning product, then the product is safe. This is not necessarily true. The easiest, and most reliable, way to choose safer cleaning products is to choose products that have been certified by third-party programs such as the Green Seal™ and EcoLogo™ certification programs. See *Resources* for contact information. These groups identify cleaning products that:

- ▶ contain the safest possible ingredients.
- ▶ perform well.
- ▶ are cost-effective.
- ▶ avoid added fragrances that can cause respiratory irritation and trigger asthma.

The certified cleaning product categories include general purpose cleaners, glass cleaners, bathroom cleaners, carpet cleaners and floor cleaners. Choosing certified products that meet green standards is a good way to reduce toxins and make an immediate positive impact on the health of the ECE environment. To quickly identify these certified products, check the label for Green Seal or Ecologo certification. Avoid products that say POISON, DANGER, CAUTION or WARNING.

Safer disinfectants

The only program that certifies disinfectants that are safer for people and the environment is the EPA’s Safer Choice Program. If you see the Safer Choice logo on an EPA-authorized disinfectant label, you will know the product is:

- ▶ in the least hazardous EPA Toxicity Categories;
- ▶ a least hazardous carcinogenic or endocrine disruptor product;
- ▶ among the least hazardous for developmental, reproductive, or neurotoxic harm.

RESOURCES

A full listing of products certified as cleaners (both household and institutional) can be found online:

Design for the Environment
<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-labels/dfe-certified-disinfectants>

California Childcare Health Program (2005)
Recommendations for Cleaning, Sanitizing and Disinfecting
<https://cchp.ucsf.edu/content/health-and-safety-notes>

Rose, L, Westinghouse, C, and the National Cleaning for Healthy Schools and Infection Control Workgroup (2020)
Infection control handbook for schools <https://www.informedgreensolutions.org/cleaning-for-healthier-schools-infection-control-handbook>