

BACK-TO-SCHOOL

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GREEN SCHOOL GEAR

*This year, choose safer, non-toxic options
for heading back to the classroom...*

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

There are few times of the year as revitalizing as the beginning of fall, when children of all ages and temperaments wipe the slate clean and prepare to return to school. There is something inspiring about this cycle, as summer's freewheeling charm gives way to the seriousness of September. It is a timeless, comforting turn of events.

As necessary as it is for parents to instill in kids a thirst for knowledge, we must also teach them—early and often—the importance of good health. When we don't feel well we aren't quite ourselves, and our ability to learn, process, and retain new information is compromised. Unfortunately, things that are not good for us—in our food, home



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furnishings, personal products, and more—can be found at every turn.

In this day and age, there is so much to worry about as your children board the bus to school each morning. Far too many school supplies contain dangerous chemicals that are particularly harmful for kids, and the same can be said of the food served in the cafeteria. If parents, teachers and administrators can be proactive about protecting students from some of the less obvious—but no less hazardous—chemical exposures in their midst, everybody wins.

Nothing says “back-to-school” more than a pack of pencils, a blank notebook, and a new backpack. These staples are among the seemingly endless trail of supplies children require throughout the year. And while few things might seem more innocuous than a plastic lunch box, beware the dangers lurking inside.

LOSE THE PVCS

If you haven't heard of PVC—which stands for polyvinyl chloride—commit those three letters to memory, and avoid them like the plague. PVC is a toxic plastic containing chemicals like phthalates, lead, and cadmium, which cause cancer, exacerbate asthma symptoms, and contribute to lifelong health problems.

DEIRDRE IMUS...



...Deirdre Imus, Founder of the site devoted to environmental health, ImusEnvironmentalHealth.org, a resource for healthy green living where Deirdre shares tips on how to “green” the way you care for yourself, family and the planet. Everything from the food you eat, the clothes you wear, baby care products, cosmetics, and personal care products, you'll find practical advice and tips for a healthier lifestyle. Deirdre is a vegetarian for life! Deirdre is also President and Founder of The Deirdre Imus Environmental Health Center® at Hackensack University Medical Center and Co-Founder/Co-Director of the Imus Cattle Ranch for Kids with Cancer. It is the only vegetarian working cattle ranch for kids with cancer. Deirdre is a *New York Times* multiple best-selling author and appears weekly on Imus in the Morning's Blonde on Blonde and Psychos. The Deirdre Imus Environmental Health Center® works to ensure children live the healthiest lives possible—today, tomorrow, and decades from now. In her quest to clean up the environment for our kids, Deirdre developed the award-winning Greening The Cleaning® program and product line, which replaces the hazardous ingredients commonly found in cleaning agents with environmentally-responsible, less toxic products wherever possible. The program and products are used throughout the country in schools, healthcare facilities, and businesses. ◀



How can the average parent keep their kids prepared for school, but also safe? Shop for PVC-free school supplies that won't contaminate your child's growing body or exacerbate symptoms in children on the autism spectrum. The Center for Health, Environment & Justice (CHEJ), a national nonprofit organization that works to eliminate harmful toxic exposures, notes that PVC products are often labeled with the word "vinyl." Additionally, the number "3" might appear inside the universal recycling symbol, or look for the letters "V" or "PVC" below it.

CHEJ also recommends choosing non-plastic products whenever possible, like cloth lunch bags instead of plastic lunch boxes, and cardboard, fabric-covered three-ring binders rather than vinyl ones.

Note the material of your little one's backpack: many are produced using shiny plastic that contains PVC or lead. The lead in particular easily wipes onto children's hands, and those hands eventually touch the food that goes into their mouths. Opt for canvas, leather, or nylon backpacks instead, or look for an explicit "PVC-free" label.

WHAT'S LURKING IN YOUR CHILD'S CLOTHING?

Few items offer kids the opportunity to express themselves more than clothing, but be wary of hazardous chemicals contained within. A 2014 investigation by the independent environmental organization Greenpeace found a broad range of hazardous chemicals in children's clothing and footwear across a number of major clothing brands, including H&M, GAP, Adidas, Nike, Puma, and Burberry.

The chemicals detected included hormone disrupting nonylphenol ethoxylates (NPEs) and phthalates;

reproductive and immune toxins in the perfluorochemicals family; anti-mony, a material similar to arsenic; and organotins, which can damage immune and nervous systems. To read more on this topic and for tips on keeping kids chemical-free, check out www.HealthyChild.org, run by the Environmental Working Group.

For a list of stores and brands selling clean, nontoxic clothing, and all other sorts of supplies, check out CHEJ's "Back to School Guide to PVC-Free School Supplies," last updated in 2013. You have the power to protect your children from poisons, in and out of the classroom. (<http://www.chej.org/publications/PVCGuide/PVCfree.pdf>)

TAKE A PASS ON THE PESTICIDES

Now that you've armed your kids with their non-toxic lunchbox, make sure the food inside it is equally free of harmful ingredients. If for no other reason than many school districts still serve students "pink slime" meat, which is washed with ammonia-treated filler, the need for wholesome lunches has never been greater.

There has been a strong push from the federal government to make school lunches healthier by including more fruits, vegetables, and other healthy options. But if these foods are not grown on organic farms, it may be doing more harm than good.

Pesticides are bad for all of us, but they are *really* bad for kids. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), infants and children are especially sensitive to pesticide residues found in food and water. On its website, the EPA notes that pesticides may block nutrient absorption, or permanently alter the way an individual's biological system operates. What's more, children's bodies are less efficient at removing pesticides if the excretory system is not fully developed.

Go to the source: find out where your school district gets its produce. No amount of pesticide usage is acceptable. If you choose to serve pesticide-free or organic produce in your home, for health reasons or any other, you shouldn't have to worry that your children's diet is comparatively sub-par in the cafeteria.

Urge your school district to link with a pesticide-free farm-to-school program, which benefits bodily health and can also give your local economy a boost. The National Farm to School Network (www.farmtoschool.org) is a good place to start: it is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and preschools.

GOOD HEALTH STARTS AT HOME

Lunch is hardly the only meal deserving of attention: according to the American Dietetic Association, nearly half of all children don't eat breakfast every day. Not only has research shown that eating breakfast can improve a child's overall nutritional profile, but ADA research suggests that eating breakfast may also improve children's memory, test scores, and school attendance.

As any parent with a child on the autism spectrum knows, controlling diet is often crucial to eliminating poor behavior, and to making sure that kids are physically and emotionally comfortable. Starting the day with a nutritious meal—which can be as simple as a scrambled egg, or



a container of protein-rich, nonfat yogurt—is beneficial for all kids.

Take note of your children's exercise level during the school year: are they moving around enough? Whether they participate in a school-run team sport or an independent league, endorse activity as much as possible. Numerous studies have shown that engaging in physical activity improves performance in the classroom. Most kids won't recognize this connection, preferring to come home and laze in front of the television rather than running laps around the track.

It is equally important to encourage exercise in children with autism, 32 percent of whom are obese, according to a 2014 report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). While joining a team with higher-functioning kids might not be an option, experts have found that swimming tends to be a comforting

▶ **GET MOVING!**—Research shows that kids who exercise regularly perform better in the classroom.

activity for this population. Also, setting up a treadmill in front of a television is a motivating factor because they can watch a favorite television show or movie while working out.

Few factors affect a student's performance in the classroom more than the atmosphere created in the home. Create a quiet space where your kids can focus on schoolwork, and make sure the area is clean, gets natural light, and that your child has his own set of materials. Box up notebooks and other items from previous school years, so that your student understands this is a brand new moment full of possibility and achievement, regardless of what challenges they faced the year before.

These tenets for health and success are neither difficult to follow, nor terribly innovative. They are, rather, time-tested, back-to-basics approaches to helping every child in your home thrive and stay healthy during the school year, but with a



“green” twist: steer clear of chemicals, and promote healthy eating, exercise, and study habits.

So many personal touches have been lost in our fast-paced, wireless culture, and I encourage parents to remain hands-on, no matter how easy technology has made it to parachute in and out of our children's lives. Most often, it's the ones who can't express their needs who need your love and compassion the most. Even the most harried household can find a sense of order each day, as children and parents alike find space in which to thrive. ◀



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