



# Toxic-Free Child Program Script

Use with brochure: “Healthy Kids: Protecting Your Child from Toxic Exposures,”  
available in English and Spanish

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## NOTE

It is important to maintain a positive attitude while conducting this class. The intent is to improve maternal and infant health, empower parents and caregivers, and offer simple suggestions for decreasing exposure to toxic substances in the home. The instructor should convey an attitude of “you have choices for actions in the home and at the grocery store” and refrain from any emphasis about dire health consequences from exposure to toxic substances. It is also important to be interactive and encourage audience participation and questions.

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## SUGGESTED SCRIPT

Good morning! My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

I’m a nurse (or your profession); I work for \_\_\_\_\_.

Ice Breaker: How many of you have children? How old are they?

There are many things we do to help our babies be healthy when we are pregnant or have infants and toddlers at home. What are some of the things we do? (Ask audience).

### Possible Answers

- Eat Nutritious Food When Pregnant
- Don’t Drink Alcohol or Smoke When Pregnant
- Exercise
- Get Enough Sleep
- Take My Baby to Well-Child Visits

We want you to know about a few more ways to keep your babies and young children healthy—simple things you can do at home. I’m going to be talking about chemicals and **toxic substances**.

Chemicals are all around us; some of them are helpful to us—

- Water is a chemical!
- How about helium? In balloons?
- Have you heard of ascorbic acid? It’s Vitamin C.
- But some chemicals are harmful to our health.



We are going to talk about these chemicals, the ones that can be harmful to health. We call harmful chemicals toxic substances.

### **Have you heard of toxic substances? Can you give me an example of a toxic substance?**

(Answers may include lead or mercury, pesticides or hair dye).

A **toxic** substance means any **chemical** or mixture that may be harmful to human health if inhaled, swallowed, or absorbed through the skin.

We want to help you avoid some of the most harmful toxic substances.

The unborn babies of pregnant women and young children are more at risk for harmful health effects. Why is this? Well, babies do things like crawl on the floor and put everything in their mouths (hand-to-mouth behavior). The brains of newborns, babies, and young children are not fully developed, so a toxic substance could have a more serious or permanent impact on them than on an adult.

Let's talk about simple things to do at home to avoid toxic substances.

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## **IN YOUR HOME**

One easy thing to do at home is to leave your shoes at the door.

### **Does anybody do this? Why do you do it?**

("Keep dirt out of my home," etc.)

Leaving your shoes at the front door helps you avoid tracking dirt and dust-bound pollutants into your home. Toxic substances like lead, pesticides, and flame-retardant chemicals are found in dust or sometimes in dirt. You may wonder, "where do these pollutants on the bottom of your shoes come from?"

Some toxic substances can be in the soil and then can be tracked inside on shoes, or blow in through open doors and windows ending up in indoor dust. (An aside: fresh air is good! Let's just get rid of the dust once it's in our home).

Or these chemicals and toxic substances can come from furniture or products in homes or work places. Some examples include flame retardants that are in some sofa cushion stuffing and flame-retardant chemicals in electronics, like your TV or computer.

### **What are these harmful toxic substances that may be in dust?**

Lead can cause damage to the brain and nerves in developing fetuses, infants, and young children.



Pesticides (which kill bugs) can harm your baby’s nervous system.

Flame retardants can affect a child’s brain development.

So what should we do? **Wet mopping** is best to clean up this dirt and dust. Use a wet mop or cloth (on windowsills for example) to get rid of dust instead of spreading dust around with a broom or a dry cloth.

And remember, washing your hands after cleaning and before eating is important.

### Furniture and Flame Retardants

Most of us enjoy sitting on our comfy sofas and chairs. The stuffing or foam of sofas, chairs, and mattresses may contain flame-retardant chemicals. When you are buying a new sofa, chair, or mattress, try for a “flame-retardant free” one. Most of us can’t just get rid of the sofas we have, though, so just be aware of any rips or tears and sew them up right away. When furniture and foam pillows rip and fray, flame-retardants can get into the air and/or dust, where they may remain for many years, especially indoors. Repair these rips; this helps keep the foam and stuffing contained.

Flame-retardants can affect children’s brain development. PBDEs is the “short” chemical name for flame retardants.

### Painting

When you are newly pregnant and excited about the new baby coming—this is not the time to paint your baby’s room. Don’t remodel or strip paint if you are pregnant.

Be careful with old peeling paint: it may contain lead. Little ones could breathe in the small particles floating in the dust or get it in their mouths. As you know if you’ve had kids, once a baby starts crawling, everything goes in the mouth. Unfortunately, lead has a sweet taste.

Your landlord may want to repaint your house or apartment—and that could look very nice! But remember, older homes (those built before 1978) could have paint that contains lead. Any repainting or repair work on an older home should be done using “lead-safe” practices.

Ask your landlord: Is the contractor using “lead-safe” practices and are they certified to do so?

Paint today (after 1978) does not contain lead but it can contain other harmful chemicals. Paint often has a strong smell. Some paints contain something called VOC chemicals (this stands for Volatile Organic Compounds). These VOC chemicals can cause breathing problems and illnesses. Choose VOC-free paint if you can for painting inside your home. Again, it’s best not to paint at all when you are pregnant.



## Smoking

Don't allow anyone to smoke in your home or around your children! Second-hand smoke can harm a growing baby and may lead to low birth weight newborns, asthma, and/or learning problems.

Smoking outside, while better than smoking inside, is still unhealthy for everyone in the house, as the chemicals in cigarette smoke stay in the air and on the smoker's clothing. Really try to have everyone who lives in your home QUIT.

## How about cleaning products? How do you know if a cleaning product contains toxics?

It's hard to tell, but look for "free and clear" on the label. Or make your own cleaning products! Do any of you make your own cleaning products?

Some cleaning chemicals and other products with strong scents like air fresheners contain phthalates which can cause health problems, such as thyroid disease, cancer, low birth weight, and infertility. Phthalates are a type of toxic substance that may interfere with your body's hormone system.

These chemicals confuse your body; your body may think the chemical is a natural hormone, but it is not. For example, very young children's bodies may think that the chemical is estrogen, and their bodies will say: "here is some estrogen, let's do estrogen's work" (which might be breast development). But it is too early for your toddler to have estrogen working in her body!

We can't avoid all human-made chemicals and toxic substances; we just want you to be aware of some of the most harmful to pregnant women and little children. You can choose what kind of cleaning products to buy. We suggest that you get "unscented" or "fragrance-free." Or make your own! And use alternatives to air fresheners, such as fresh air, if you can.

(Note to instructor: cleaning product recipes are included at the end of this script, and downloadable "recipe cards" are available on the Texas Physicians for Social Responsibility website.)


## Bugs!

We don't like them in our homes. Try to prevent bugs and pests from coming in to your home or apartment. Keeping the pests out of your home means you won't need harsh chemicals to kill them.

### Prevention methods to keep bugs out of your home include

- Store food in tightly closed containers;
- Clean up food spills from counters and the floor;
- Seal around doors and windows to keep bugs out.





Pesticides are toxic chemicals to kill and repel insects. They are harmful to pests and can be harmful to human health as well. They can harm a baby’s developing brain and nervous system.

Pesticides can affect women, too, by causing menstrual cycle changes or difficulty getting pregnant.

Don’t spray pesticides in your home; try prevention methods instead. If you need to, use a non-chemical method such as “catch in a trap” method.

Your landlord might spray your apartment or house with pesticides. Be prepared if this happens: pregnant women and infants should leave the home for one day if the house is sprayed to kill bugs.

We have all heard about the need for pregnant women to not get mosquito bites. Have you heard about the Zika virus?

We want you to know that it is safe for pregnant women to use DEET bug spray to avoid mosquito bites. Use a bug repellent product that has a minimum of 20% DEET and no more than 30% concentration of DEET. That, along with other protection like long pants and long sleeves, is a good way to prevent mosquito bites.

Encourage everyone in your family to wear insect repellent, too. Zika can make children, teens, and adults sick—and it can be sexually transmitted, so even if you are taking precautions to prevent mosquito bites, you could still be at risk if your partner gets bitten and infected.

### **What about your cat or dog?**

Try to not use chemical flea-and-tick collars for your pet. Groom and comb your dog often and clean his bedding frequently in hot, soapy water. Ask your vet about the safest way to keep fleas away from your dog, cat, and your home.

### **Kid’s pajamas**

Have you ever read the labels in children’s pajamas? It can be confusing!

Those labels may say “flame resistant.” Does that mean the pajamas have toxic chemicals in them? It’s important for you to know the facts so you can decide what is best for your infants and young children.

Children’s PJs—9 months size and larger—are required to be “flame resistant” (FR) unless they are snug-fitting cotton. It’s important to read the labels.

Testing has been done on many kids’ PJs. Many do not contain flame resistant chemicals at all; the fibers and/or the weave of the fabric may be protective. Or you can choose PJs with the label that says “Wear snug-fitting. Not flame resistant.” These pajamas do not contain flame



resistant chemicals. Some of the concern about pajamas and fire is the danger that loose-fitting gowns or pants might catch a spark and catch fire, so wearing snug-fitting PJs helps keep kids safe.

### Lead in Toys/Safe Toys

It's hard to know where the toys that we buy are made. Some of the toys made outside the USA have harmful chemicals in them. And children chew on toys and put them in their mouths.

Always read the labels and avoid kids' jewelry and cosmetics. When possible, choose plastic-free toys such as fabric teething rings, unpainted wooden toys, or cloth and plush toys.

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## IN YOUR KITCHEN

Pesticides again! Just like we want to stay away from pesticides sprayed in your home, you need to avoid pesticides in your food—particularly on fruits and vegetables. Rinse produce with water and dry with a paper towel or clean cloth. Remove and discard outer leaves of produce (like lettuce). Doing this removes bacteria and some of the pesticides.

Organic fruits and vegetables are considered safer, but can also be more expensive. Strawberries are usually the most important fruit to buy organic, if you can. Each year, fruits and vegetables that have the highest pesticide residues are listed on a “Dirty Dozen” list. For 2017, the list includes, in order of highest to lowest amount of pesticide residues: strawberries, spinach, nectarines, apples, peaches, celery, grapes, pears, cherries, tomatoes, sweet bell peppers, and potatoes.

### How do you reheat food in your kitchen? Do you use a microwave?

If you use a microwave, use a glass dish or container to reheat the food. Don't use plastic. Heating food in plastic containers may cause harmful chemicals to leak out into the food.


BPA and BPS are chemicals in some plastics. They are called “endocrine disruptors” and can affect the reproductive system of fetuses and children. Remember the artificial fragrances, called phthalates? These chemicals also confuse your body's hormone system.

BPA or a similar chemical are frequently on the linings of canned food to keep the food from sticking to the cans. Try to eat fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables instead. Chemicals in the can linings may cause harm to developing fetuses and young children.

You make choices every day for what's best for your family. As I said at the start of this class, you can't avoid all chemicals. But once you know the facts, you can choose what's best for your family. Sometimes you just have to weigh all the pros and cons and make a best choice for that day!

**Fish is healthy for you!** Everyone, including pregnant women, should eat up to 2 meals with





fish every week. But some fish, especially large fish like shark and swordfish, may contain high levels of mercury.

Why is mercury harmful? It is a strong “neurotoxin,” meaning that it can hurt your brain and nervous system. Fetuses, newborns, and infants are still developing their brains and are more susceptible to the harms of mercury. Because it may hurt their brain cells, mercury can increase the risk for learning and behavior problems in children.

You can’t smell, see, or taste mercury, and cooking has no effect on the mercury in the fish. So we have to avoid the fish with mercury—we can’t fix it by cooking after we bring the fish home.

Choose fish that are less likely to be contaminated with mercury. (Instructor: see the printable handout from the FDA, [“Advice About Eating Fish.” https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/Metals/UCM536321.pdf](https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/Metals/UCM536321.pdf))

Tilapia, salmon, and shrimp have low mercury. Also, buy light tuna, not albacore tuna. Avoid swordfish, shark, and orange roughy fish.

### **What’s another very simple way to avoid toxic substances every day?**

With the **soap** that we choose. We don’t need soaps that say “antibacterial” or “antimicrobial.” Triclosan is a chemical and toxic substance used in soaps labeled “antibacterial;” it has recently been banned from soap, but many soaps containing the chemical are still on the grocery store shelves.

We just need regular soap and water to wash our hands.

Triclosan is chemical that can disrupt and confuse our hormone system. While the Triclosan will be eventually gone from soaps, it is still on the shelves now in stores.

When soap and water are not available, alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be used.

Since young children are often on the floor and putting things in their mouths, and older kids who play outside might get in the dirt, have all kids wash their hands before every meal. We’ve talked about how lead can damage brain cells, especially in very young children since their brains are still developing. So washing dirt and other possible sources of lead off of little hands before they eat can help keep our kids safe.

Another tip to reduce harmful effects of lead is for children to eat breakfast every day. A full stomach blunts absorption of lead. Kids don’t intend to get lead in their bodies, of course, but it could be coming into the home from outside and also in tiny paint chips that turn to dust.

### **Beauty Products**

I bet most of us like a little help keeping “pretty.” (Make some comment to the men in the room). It’s OK to use makeup and, of course, products like shampoo, but choosing your products carefully is important.



Let's talk about some toxic substances/harsh chemicals that are in our hair products and makeup/cosmetics.

Try to choose shampoo, hair products, and cosmetics that are fragrance-free. Fragrances (the “smell good” scents) in makeup and shampoos/conditioners are often artificial chemicals. These are often made from petrochemicals and phthalates. These harmful chemicals have been linked to learning disabilities and other developmental problems in children. Remember, phthalates are a type of toxic that confuses the hormone system in your body or your child's body.

Read the label on your cosmetics and hair products. Labels are often long and technical. Look for a short list of ingredients. Look for the phrase “sodium laureth sulfate-free.”

Nail polish usually has harsh chemicals like formaldehyde. Some companies are making nail polish now called “Big 3-Free” which doesn't include 3 harsh toxic chemicals. Wet and Wild makes a Big 3-Free nail polish. You can get Essie, Wet and Wild, or Pure Ice polish that are Big 3-Free. If you don't see Big 3-Free options on the shelf at your usual store, ask the store manager to start stocking them.

Babies and toddlers often chew on their fingernails. This means they are swallowing or inhaling some of the nail polish. It is best to not use nail polish on your baby (under age 3). Older girls can use Big 3-Free or Big 5-Free if they are wearing nail polish on fingers or toes.

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## IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD/OUTSIDE

We all have heard about air pollution. Some days you can see the haze, but sometimes the sky looks blue and clear, and we hear that it is an Ozone Action Day.

### Does anyone know where ozone comes from?

Ground-level ozone, or smog, is air pollution and harmful to breathe. Ozone is formed when the smoke or exhaust from cars or factories combines with sunlight in a chemical reaction. You can't see ozone.

The air is not healthy for anyone on Ozone Action days, but it can be especially harmful for children with asthma or adults with breathing problems like COPD. Usually, outdoor air is better for us than indoor air, but on Ozone Action days, it's better for young children or kids with asthma to stay inside if possible.

To find out when it's an Ozone Action Day, listen to the TV news or look it up on your phone. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) provides daily updates on their website, too.

Even if it looks like a beautiful day, air pollution can cause respiratory or breathing problems. Breathing in particulate matter, like soot, can cause heart and circulatory diseases such as





high blood pressure.

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## CONCLUSION

You have choices every day, at home and in the grocery store. Avoiding toxic substances or harsh chemicals does not have to be an expensive choice.

- Perhaps you will buy frozen fruit instead of canned.
- Perhaps you will buy a store-brand shampoo that is fragrance-free and says “phthalates-free” and “sodium laureth-free.”
- You might decide to wet mop instead of sweeping the kitchen floor.
- If you are pregnant, you know that it is a good idea to get out of the house or apartment for one day when the landlord sprays for bugs.

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## DEMO OF MAKING CLEANING PRODUCT

See our website for printable cleaning products recipe cards.

### **All-purpose cleaner**

Ingredients: 32 oz. spray bottle; ½ cup white vinegar; 4 cups warm water; 6-10 drops essential oil, or lemon or lime juice

Instructions: In a large spray bottle, combine vinegar and water. Add drops of essential oil, or lemon or lime juice. Shake before each use.

### **Baking Soda Scrub**

Ingredients: ½ cup baking soda; water

Instructions: Pour baking soda into bowl. Add enough water to make a texture like frosting. Scoop mixture onto a sponge and wash surface.

### **Glass Cleaner**

Ingredients: 1 cup of white vinegar; 1 cup of water

Instructions: Mix ingredients in a spray bottle. Spray on surface. Wipe clean with sheets of newspaper.

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Authored by Trish O’Day MSN, RN, CNS, Toxic-Free Child Program Manager, Texas Physicians for Social Responsibility, May 2017

[www.texaspsr.org](http://www.texaspsr.org) | [TXPSRdirector@gmail.com](mailto:TXPSRdirector@gmail.com)

