

Choose Safe Places: Information for Parents/Guardians



Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education

Planning. Guidance. Protection.

The voluntary “Choose Safe Places” program helps early care and education programs choose locations that are safe from environmental hazards. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Environmental Health (DPH) offers free resources and assistance to help early childhood educators keep children safe from toxic chemicals.



As a parent, you want your child to grow up in a healthy and safe environment. This includes protecting them from harmful chemicals that might be in the air, water, soil, and dust. You might already do things to reduce their exposure to chemicals at home, but what about the other places where your child spends time?

Early education and care programs play an important role in keeping your child safe.

Many young children spend more time at an early education and care program than anywhere else outside of their home. That means it's especially important to make sure your kids are cared for in a safe environment where they are not exposed to harmful chemicals.

Chemicals can pose a hidden danger.

Children and adults could be exposed to harmful chemicals from sources such as:

- Outdoor air pollution
- Chemicals used indoors
- Contaminated soil and groundwater
- Polluted drinking water

These chemicals can get into our bodies through breathing, eating or drinking, or skin contact.

Children are more sensitive to harmful chemicals than adults.

Children's developing brains and growing bodies make them more vulnerable to the effects of harmful chemicals. Children are exposed more than adults because they put their hands in their mouths, play on the ground, and drink more water and breathe more air for their size. Exposure to toxic chemicals can disrupt development, learning, and behavior. It can also lead to diseases later in life.

How do early education and care programs protect children from chemicals?

The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) requires every licensed early education and care program to comply with safety regulations. Some of these reduce chemical exposure, like restrictions on pesticide application and required testing of drinking water wells.

DPH's voluntary Choose Safe Places program builds on these protections. With EEC's support, DPH is working with participating early childhood educators to check for environmental contamination when they choose a new location. These checks can help educators avoid locations with harmful chemicals from nearby businesses or past activities.

Choose Safe Places helps new programs check for hazards.

Through this voluntary program, DPH assists participating educators planning to open new early education and care programs. Educators start by filling out a questionnaire, then DPH helps them consider the following factors:

Former uses of the site



Former uses might have left harmful substances. For example, dry cleaners, factories, gas stations, and dump sites might have contaminated the soil and groundwater. Even if people don't use the groundwater, certain pollutants can vaporize and enter indoor air through cracks in the foundation.

DPH helps educators find out how their buildings and nearby properties were used in the past. For buildings built before 1978, we can also help educators get a lead paint inspection.

Nearby sites and activities



Certain activities nearby could pollute the air, leave chemicals on the ground that can wash onto neighboring properties, or pollute groundwater.

DPH helps educators learn about nearby businesses that use chemicals, such as dry cleaners, nail salons, gas stations, factories, and farms. We also look at how close they are to highways and hazardous cleanup sites (like Superfund sites).

Access to safe drinking water



Clean water is crucial, especially for infants who drink formula made with tap water. Public water supplies are regulated and tested, but private wells are the owner's responsibility to test. Also, lead from old pipes could leach into the water.

DPH can help educators learn how to check for lead plumbing and test their private well water.

Naturally occurring contamination



Some contaminants occur naturally in air, water, and soil. Radon gas is a common natural hazard. It can seep from underground into indoor air.

DPH can help educators learn how to test their buildings for radon.

Parents and guardians can help by asking a few good questions.

When you choose an early education and care program for your child, look for a clean, safe environment. Here are a few questions you can ask. Some ask about hazards covered by EEC regulations, others are just smart questions.

1. Have they tested for radon? What were the results?
2. If the building was built before 1978, has it been inspected for lead paint?*
3. If they have a private well, has it been tested?* Have they checked their plumbing for lead?
4. Has anyone conducted an environmental assessment on the property? If it found any problems, have they been corrected?

*Regulatory requirement for group and school-age programs



You can learn more.

Call DPH at 617-624-5757
or visit www.mass.gov/choose-safe-places-for-early-care-and-education



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