

# Chapter 8

## Protect Your Family, Protect Our Planet

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**G**overnment policy and personal action are both needed to effectively protect children from pollutants. And when we protect our families, usually we protect the planet too. This chapter is mainly about what you can do to protect your own family. For each pollutant I give tips for protecting both your family and the planet.

But personal action is not protective without government policy. Air pollution is a good example. In the prologue I mentioned that my personal interest in pollution is because I grew up during the smoggiest time in history in Los Angeles. In high school when I worked out with the swim team, my lungs hurt and I coughed afterward. This was true for the whole swim team. To decrease the smog-producing emissions from your own car, you can drive less, or not at all, on a day that is predicted to be smoggy. If everyone did that, it would work. But everyone won't. This is called a "tragedy of the commons."<sup>1</sup> People opt for the thing that is easiest for them personally in the short term. So even on a smoggy day, most of us hop in our cars and drive as much as we want. But short-term gains often create long-term tragedies.

The L.A. smog problem was not solved by individual people refusing to drive. Instead, smog was reduced dramatically by state regulations on automobile emissions starting in 1966. Between 1970 and 1996 the peak air pollution declined almost 60%. This was even though Californians drove more than twice as many miles in 1996 as in 1970.<sup>2</sup> Government action was the key.

Government regulations for lead and PCBs reduced children's exposure enormously, as we saw in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. But effective regulation of lead in children's toys and jewelry, mercury emissions, mercury in fish, pesticides, and noise exposures are still a wish rather than a reality.

In this book I have covered just a few pollutants for which there is solid evidence of negative effects on children's behavioral health. There are other pollutants that also affect children's behavioral function, such as hormone

disrupters. But the evidence for effects on humans is not yet as clear even though the animal research evidence of harm is accumulating rapidly. Also, any pollutant that affects physical health will affect children's behavioral functioning. Asthma is a good example. High air pollution can trigger asthma attacks. Children with asthma are likely to miss more school. Absence from school is a risk for poor academic performance. So, the range of pollutants that influence children's behavior goes much beyond those in this book.

My aim in this chapter is to help parents put the information in this book into practice without panicking. Those of us who are lackadaisical about protecting ourselves are much more motivated to protect our children. Here's a conversation I had with one of my relatives who is an artist. She knows that her "flake white" paint contains lead, and she paints without gloves. She told me she enjoys painting much more without gloves. And she says the leaded "flake white" works better than other white paints. When I said, "The lead will be stored in your bones," she merely nodded. But when I added, "When you breast feed your first baby, the lead will be mobilized out of your bones," her expression changed. She said, "I think I better find a lead-free substitute for my 'flake white.'" Cutting back your own exposure can reduce child exposure for pollutants in the home or for pollutants that can be transferred prenatally or via breast milk.

## Lead

Lead is a useful industrial metal, but it should be kept out of the environment. Less lead exposure is better. The scientific consensus is now that there is no threshold for negative effects of lead. If you wanted to poison people with a toxic substance, what better way than to coat the interiors of their dwellings and distribute the substance broadly in the air.<sup>3</sup> That's what happened with lead. But we also have to watch out for other sources of lead such as from toy and hobbies. Here are some tips for reducing your own family's lead exposure and preventing further dispersal of lead in the environment.

1. *Blood testing.* If you live or have lived in a home built before 1978, ask your doctor about testing your children's lead. If your child goes to school or daycare in an older building his or her lead should be tested. Lead testing is especially important if you have done remodeling while you lived in an older home.

2. *Children's toys and jewelry.* In 2007 the news headlines reported the recall of Thomas the Train because of lead-based paint. This toy set was manufactured in China, and there was finger pointing over who to blame.. Were companies in China cheating on the toy standards by using lead paint? Did the U.S. companies fail to specify no lead paint? Was the enforcement unfair? But toy recalls are not a new problem. Crayons made in China were recalled