

A healthy start in life – Protecting children from hazardous chemicals.

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Project Nesting was created by WECF, Women in Europe for a Common Future. The right to a healthy and safe environment for children is one of the main missions of WECF, a network of a hundred women's and environmental organisations in 40 countries. WECF has three offices: in the Netherlands, Germany and France. WECF mobilises women to find affordable solutions to the environmental health problems in their communities and encourages women in decision making.

Nesting helps parents to create a healthy and safe environment for their newborn babies.

Nowadays, in western countries, an infant's start in life - could hardly be better. The infant mortality rate, in recent years, has continued to decline, life expectancy has increased and fatal infections such as measles, smallpox, polio and cholera can be largely defeated. But, today, children are exposed to other health hazards, which a few decades ago were neither known nor imaginable: hazardous chemicals and substances in everyday products. In 1931 only one million tonnes of chemicals were being produced worldwide, in 2000 this production had grown to more than 400 million tonnes. Although our modern life has benefited hugely from many of these chemicals, the World Health Organisation (WHO) confirms that there is clear scientific evidence that exposure to very low doses of hazardous chemicals and substances can cause harm to the foetus, infant and child during vulnerable periods of development. This has resulted in a dramatic increase in certain childhood diseases associated with environmental factors. These results are irreversible and can be multi-generational.

Children are not only exposed to one chemical, but to a combination of hazardous chemicals and substances, during early development. While the combined effects are only beginning to be understood this "chemical cocktail" ending up in children's bodies, is already being linked to cancer, diabetes, learning and behavioural disorders and also, laying the foundation for other diseases later in life. Concerned scientists warn that there is a greater health risk for the unborn and young children, and that preventative actions need to be taken quickly.

Policy is asleep, while women of WECF act

Current European legislation for Pesticides, Toys, Cosmetics and Chemicals do NOT adequately protect the developing foetus, infant and child according to us. Children's exposure to hazardous chemicals and substances from toys, clothes, furniture, shampoos and other personal care products or the spraying of pesticides around playgrounds and schools, has to be reduced now. Yet it seems as if politicians are asleep. But WECF feels urgent action is necessary.

I got involved in the Nesting Project 3 years ago, when my 4 year old son was diagnosed with cancer, Burkitt Lymphoma, non-hodgkin. A cancer more and more associated with the huge use of pesticides in the country side in the sixties and seventies and together with brain cancer very prominent among family members of agricultural workers. It was a sad and devastating period for our whole family. My son is relatively healthy now, but we don't know what the health effects of the intensive chemotherapy will be later on in his life. But reading the evidence on the environmental causes of Burkitt Lymphoma was a wake up story for me. As a

mother I thought it was time to act and fight for a toxic free future for our children by informing other parents.

WECF created the Nesting project to facilitate action. The aim of nesting is to sensitise parents, pregnant women and multipliers such as; midwives, gynecologists, pediatricians and family counselling organisations, to adverse environmental impacts on children . Nesting hands them a tool to protect babies, at least in their immediate home environment and enables them to ensure a healthy start to a healthy life.

Informing consumers - Expectant parents change their (consumption) behaviour

Polls have shown that living in a transitional phase, like the birth of a child, makes many people change their consumption patterns. At this stage adults often think for the first time about the impacts on health from everyday products or those they want to buy for their child. The number of children's products on the market is huge and they can contain hazardous chemicals such as plasticisers in nappy-changing-mats and baby bottles, formaldehyde in bedding, and brominated flame retardants in toys. The demand for healthy, safe and sustainable products is big.

That's where the Nesting website information begins. Parents are dependent on independent information to make the right choice. We want to reach mothers and fathers before the birth of a child and their first purchases for the pregnancy, the nursery and the newborn. In eight European languages : German, Dutch, English, Greek, Hungarian, French Spanish and Estonian - expectant parents receive information on the website www.projectnesting.org on how to create a welcoming, stimulating and at the same time healthy environment for their baby, free from contaminants and safe from accidents.

And it IS necessary to inform parents....
"New challenges for children's health"

Today we are surrounded by approximately 100,000 chemicals, almost all of which have been developed in the last 50 years. Only a small fraction of them are tested for their health and environmental impacts. None have been tested for their cumulative and combined exposure risks.

- Studies indicate that it is not only the dose of the chemical or substance that is important, but also the timing of the exposure.
- Exposure to certain chemicals and substances during early foetal development can cause brain injury at doses much lower than those affecting adult brains functions.
- The blood-brain barrier, which protects the adult brain from many toxic chemicals, is not completely formed until 6 months after birth.
- Current knowledge regarding the causes of learning and developmental disorders implies an ethical duty and responsibility to act now to protect children's health and well-being

How do chemicals accumulate in children's bodies?

When it comes to exposures, foetuses, children, and pregnant women are all vulnerable groups. The intake of hazardous chemicals and substances starts in the womb. Pregnant women can unknowingly pass on their body burden of hazardous chemicals and substances to

their developing foetus. During foetal development, the placenta offers some protection against unwanted chemical exposures, but it is not an effective barrier against environmental pollutants. For example, many heavy metals can easily cross the placenta.

Analysis of cord blood show that every baby born today has 150 to 230 toxic chemicals in his or her blood, including PCBs, phthalates, flame retardants, bisphenol A, and pesticides and heavy metals such as lead, and mercury. This means that from the day of conception, embryos and foetuses are exposed to a cocktail of toxicants that cross the placental barrier. Of the vulnerable groups, children are the ones who are the most highly burdened by hazardous chemicals and substances. They take in more pollutants and hazardous chemicals in relation to their size than adults and the effects can be much more harmful as they are still developing. For their body weight, children eat and breathe more than adults, thus a small exposure translates into a big dose. Their organ systems, particularly the nervous system, are forming and are thus more susceptible to the effects of certain chemicals. Young children are prone to hand-to-mouth behaviours that expose them to higher levels of ambient chemicals.

That's why practical information is so important. Experts recommend to refrain from renovating during pregnancy and in the newborns first six months. But many parents find it hard to resist the nesting instinct. But to ensure no risks to the unborn baby, expectant mothers should actually leave the renovation to their partners and friends.

The many ideas of creative and committed women

Europe is diverse - different cultures, different regulatory requirements, different partners in each country - a challenge for nesting and a benefit at the same time. The active participation of the partners provides the different perspectives which inspire the processes and the creation of new ideas. While the target group in Western European countries can easily be reached via the Internet, György the Hungarian large family organization NOE has to publish brochures and posters to make nesting public. Only 10 to 20 percent of the Hungarian population regularly uses the Internet. But the Hungarian brochures serve as examples for other countries. In translated form they proved to be perfect to hand out in doctors' surgeries. This has shown to be an effective model: a country creates its nesting methods, and the others benefit.

This project contributes to a Europe-wide exchange and is just the beginning. Our goal is to translate the nesting website into more languages and reach more people if possible, worldwide. We would like to expand our awareness raising also to socially deprived families and migrants. Producing, in addition to the website, simple brochures and posters conveying clear messages. The protection of our children must not only be reserved for those who are well-off.

To reach more expectant parents the training of multipliers has to be increased. Several interactive workshops, seminars and training sessions were already held in Germany, France, Hungary and the Netherlands.

Nesting – political advocacy and practical ideas

WECF sees the Nesting project as a tool to raise in a positive way awareness about creating a healthy lifestyle. WECF will never tire of advocating health and healthy products. Also the REACH (the European Chemical directive) implementation is important to follow, as well as WHO's CEHAPE (Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe).

Governments and industry should commit themselves to the precautionary principle. When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures

should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.

We are very grateful to the Flemish League of Families and COFACE, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the EU, who have created the opportunity to work on implementing a so-called Child Norm

A lot of forces are needed to reach many parents to improve a child's start in life and to achieve a sustainable change of behaviour. A campaign of committed organisations, together with authorities can achieve this vision. Project Nesting wants to make this contribution.